

Braiding the Voices

Essays in
Poetry

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MAZE

Birds are amazing, newspapers, stoves, friends. – James Richardson

But wait, there's more – as when the hummingbird
 flies backwards for the hell of it, or
the odd flamingo's pinkened up by snacking
 on blue-green algae. Aeschylus, potted
by a dropped tortoise, was one unlucky Greek –
 from the same stable as Melvin Purvis,
who pioneered belching on national radio.

Were you an ant you'd start the day by stretching,
 and, at a pinch, have a big yawn;
were you a cricket you'd listen through the slits
 of your eager forelegs: were you, alas,
a white shark, you'd never take sick but always
 be hungry: and if a caterpillar,
you'd boast to the end a couple of thousand muscles.

The ermine in white is the weasel in brown, and the chow
 the only dog with a black tongue:
mice were sacred to Apollo: a camel-hair
 may be a squirrel's tail: the mosquito's
wings are thrashing a thousand times a second.
 If you look for the only crying creature –
or laughing come to that – consult a mirror

and find, your mind bested by wonder, your eyes
lit up again at the starry torch,
rue and its makings, something of jubilee,
the shot-silk of the hours. Better,
as the man said, to keep on dreaming small,
than see given to dissipation
the friends, the stoves, the newspapers, the birds.

Stealing Poseidon's Trident

'Now he submerges once again into the sea of the unread and then surfaces puffing and rejuvenated, as proud as if he had stolen Poseidon's trident.' Elias Canetti, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981 'for writings marked by a broad outlook, a wealth of ideas and artistic power,' writes this in a journal entry perhaps of himself.¹ Whoever he had in mind, I take it as a sketch of many readers in action, at many stages of life. That sea, that surfacing, that rejuvenation – they all sound familiar. And now for a few strokes of my own in the oceanic territory, where even puffing can be revealing.

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At the southernmost tip of the Attica peninsula in Greece, on the bluff of Sounion, there stands a temple of Poseidon. Ruined over its twenty-four centuries but much restored today, there it is, in a locale as dramatic as it is beautiful. Many visitors have cut their names into its stones, including that romantic ruffian George Gordon Lord Byron. The sun blazes over a theatrically blue Aegean, the columns rise at once austere and elegantly. If the whole thing were more striking it would be intolerable. And if Poseidon existed, he would have been pleased.

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1 Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Picador by Pan Books, 1986), p. 191

To the ancient Greek mind, pleasing him could take some doing. God of the sea and of water generally, brother of Zeus the sky-god and Hades the keeper of the underworld, he had his home in a golden palace in the depths of the ocean, from which he would emerge, using his trident to lash the sea into fury, and causing either earthquakes or the welling up of new springs. He was the originator of horses, the builder of Troy's walls, and a copious begetter of various gigantic or ferocious offspring. He was the god of navigation and a god of vegetation. Black bulls were sacrificed to him, and bullfights were held in his honour. He was worshipped as a physician. Restless to the last, he was rarely shown as seated. Not a figure to take lightly, whether you went by sea or by land.

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Canetti, who knew so much and so many kinds of things, would have known this and more about Poseidon. A splendidly original reader himself, he could think of the moody god as having an interest in the oceanic realms of the written. For that is what they are, not only in the sense that the words stream out, day after day, by the billion, but in the sense that meanings interleave and overlap and sleek their currents through one another, making climates of their own. Going with some zest into reading is like going down to the sea in ships.

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For even the most enthusiastic and tenacious of readers, an incalculably large proportion of the readable is unread. While you read that sentence, millions of words were printed. Unless we are one of the obsessives of whom Canetti wrote so well elsewhere, we don't want to keep up with it all – wanting that would be like seeking the King Canute Prize for Verbal Greed. But even if what drives us is some narrower interest – in the political economy of Patagonia, in the durability of textiles, in the shifting nomenclature of rock bands – we haven't much of a chance. There are such things as experts of course, and they know (as we say) what's what; but reading in hopes of

keeping up with the entire archive is under the disadvantage mentioned of a certain academic conference; not only did everything have to be said, but everybody had to say it. Being conscientious in such a world is a good way of getting what used to be called a 'broken head'. Not to mention the heart.

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Still, it keeps coming, and so do we. After all, we do like abundance for its own sake – not always and everywhere, but often and in many places. I have no wish to traverse the Sahara Desert, but am obscurely gratified by the fact that it is big enough to accommodate something the size of Australia. It is very pleasing to know that during the Ice Age, the present site of Chicago was under a mile of ice. And what could be better than to read, of our battered planet's early fortunes, that it once rained for millions of years? Perhaps such information takes us back, beguiled, to the days when we were Lilliputians in an upscaled world, which was, as Milton says of Adam and Eve's world at the end of *Paradise Lost*, 'all before them, where to choose'. Since then, the knowledge of exile has set in pretty convincingly for most of us, but we can still get a whiff of pomegranate from time to time.

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I tell my students that if they can't read slowly they can't read, and they look at me either as if I am telling them that sodium chloride is a salt or as if I am heterodox to my fingertips: but it is still true. More of this later. Let us now, instead, praise scurrying, voracious, intemperate readers. When we began to walk, it was with little elegance, but in runty, lurching fashion: catwalks might, for all we knew of it, exist only on the moon. But walking caught on, as we did, and here we are, doing it every day as if we had done it all our lives. It isn't that we want it to happen all the time, otherwise there would be no palanquins, sedan chairs, or Toyotas: but sometimes nothing will do but *Going for a Walk*, the appetite its own justification. At such moments, the blundering zest of our early days is vindicated anew, and we course our own little worlds like so many lords of creation.

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And so it goes with reading. Perhaps our elders sometimes not always, our betters – thought that no good would come of us if we did not proceed with a proper decorum, going dutifully from one small, well-made sentence in which the cat sat on the mat and kept its mouth shut, to larger quarters in which one clause let guardedly into another before the patient gaze, and so on until we hit the varied show in which Cicero ate fire in one patch, Montaigne did swallow-dives from one trapeze to another, and Shakespeare clowned it perilously among the big cats. And perhaps the elders were right, most of the time. But the mind, like its sibling the heart, is a larrikin some of the time, and needs to live riotously. Larrikins and prodigals remember what their more proper relations are inclined to forget: that every major human resource is veined through with magic, and as such is only partly biddable. We do not learn to love reading simply by being courtly: we have to do some courting as well, and that is usually all the better for some impulsiveness.

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Memory is a rummage-sale much of the time, and no surprise, either, given the way it has been fed items even by so apparently orderly a source as the inscribed or the printed page, let alone our eerily-flickering friend, the computer screen. When the medieval scribe fills a blank patch on his vellum page with ape and curlicue and a terse complaint about the chill in the scriptorium, this is all flourish: but then so is much of the sacred tale-telling to which he is devoting his energies. It is not the mockers of the Bible but its most assiduous exegetes who bring into luminousness its variety, its contrapuntal gambits, its sprawling ménage of types, incidents, behaviours, contrivances, destinies, upheavals, solacings. Split it into chapters and verses, web it over with echoes and foreshadowings, orchestrate it from Genesis to Revelations, and it still comes up with a fiesta of astonishments.

I wonder whether, in the many studies of the Bible's impinging on human imaginations and its stimulating book upon book upon book like its own deprecated Babel, enough account has been taken of its role as exemplar or provocateur along these lines? Without some predictability we can't live, and without some novelty we don't want to; and until pretty recently the

biblical ensemble catered in a degree to both needs, just as they had no doubt played upon its complex origins. But even for those who are comparatively untouched by the Bible's reverberations, writing which is not exclusively technical is laced through with rhetorical energies, all bidding for attention and allegiance. However we may be when we read it, the written word is having a fine old time.

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I was young, 'pre' most things, when I went with my parents and brother to Bunbury, for a holiday. We were not much for travel in those days: unless somebody sent you to a war, you stayed home, and were glad of it. But Bunbury was near enough to count as one of the purlieus of Perth, and had a beachy languor about it. My father and I sauntered along its wide main street, and came across a sale of second-hand books. With a common joy, we bought and began to read *Acres and Pains* by S. J. Perelman of *New Yorker* fame – pure quirk dashed through with irony. Nowadays, when my own behaviour or someone else's seems the stuff of which hemlock is made, I occasionally think, 'But there's still Perelman.' My Perelman include 'Kitchen Bouquet', and 'Short Easterly Squall, with Low Visibility and Rising Gorge'. Respectively, they begin like this:

Yesterday morning I awoke from a deep dream of peace compounded of equal parts of allonal and Vat 69 to find that autumn was indeed here. The last leaf had fluttered off the sycamore and the last domestic of the summer solstice had packed her bundle and caught the milk train out of Trenton. Peace to her ashes, which I shall carry up henceforward from the cellar. Stay as sweet as you are, honey, and don't drive through any open drawbridges is my Christmas wish for Leona Clafin. And lest the National Labor Relations Board (just plain 'Nat' to its friends, of whom I am one of the staunchest) summon me to the hustings for unfair employer tactics, I rise to offer in evidence as pretty a nosegay of houseworkers as ever fried a tenderloin steak. Needless to say, the characters and events depicted herein are purely imaginary, and I am a man who looks like Ronald Colman and dances like Fred Astaire . . . ²

2 S. J. Perelman, 'Kitchen Bouquet', in *The Best of Perelman* (Modern Library, 1947), p. 3

What elfin charm, what pawky and mettlesome humor, tessellate the pages of Oliver Cudlipp's new garland of whimsical papers, *From a Misanthrope's Inkwell!* The title, so gruff that the unwary may not descry the impudent grin lurking beneath the domino, is a wickedly disingenuous one, for if ever author were untainted by the cheap cynicism that characterizes your modernist, 'avant-garde' scribbler, it is Cudlipp. Mellow, fantastical, *un feuilletonistic bien spirituel*, he wends his roguish way, gently puncturing our foibles with his unerring quill but never overstepping the bounds of good taste. If, occasionally, it is impossible to tell what he is driving at, do not be fooled into thinking him insipid. Pompous, attitudinizing, unreadable, yes, but never insipid . . .³

This is torrential behaviour, possible at all only because that is one of the mind's ways. We are alarmed and despondent when, against our will, mind and mouth are given their head, and the issue is manic, or outright mania; it is the mental equivalent of avalanche, and we recoil from the spectacle, let alone the experience. But like it or not, the mind is a fast breeder, intelligence is torrential after all, the natural history of the senses is of sumptuousness as well as of discriminations, and we swim with the skill of a porpoise though the krill of consciousness, the incessant storm of event. And every so often we can be glad to yield, expressly, to the tumult can be elated by the outrageous. Wit is all very fine, rapier flicking off rapier, but the sweep and plop and splash of comedy is also something for which we have a healthy appetite. A Perelman on the loose is our crumpled sibling, and something important dies in us if we deny him room.

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James Joyce, reporting that he had spent a morning on a sentence, and asked whether he was looking for the *mot juste*, said that, no, he had all the words – he was looking for the order. Perelman was out of that stable. An unbroken stallion, he was still bridled by distant, formidable intuitions of the way things must go. Having written for Marx Brothers films, he remembered

3 S. J. Perelman, 'Short Easterly Squall, with Low Visibility and Rising Gorge', *New Yorker* (24 October, 1953), p. 29

this with hatred, perhaps because for all the precision that could be seen in those performances, it is hard to isolate finesse: and what Perelman was always after was ebullience crossed with finesse.

Jonathan Swift wrote a whole book in which he deployed cliché as though it were a gift from heaven, electric with the divine intervention: Perelman, in both of the passages quoted, takes to cliché as the dark ground across which the bright mind can play – buoyant, fleeing, exuberant, a maker of splashes. 'A deep dream of peace compounded of equal parts of allonal and Vat 69' conflates one of Leigh Hunt's more lustrous poems with one of life's direr and more self-indulgent blends.⁴ 'Peace to her ashes, which I shall carry up henceforward from the cellar' plays (as he might have said) fast and loose with Victorian mock-classical lingo while taking the beset householder not only down to earth but into it. 'Stay as sweet as you are, honey, and don't drive through any open drawbridges' is an incantation that I used to recite to myself for years as a mantra, in the face of the inevitable, the unintelligible and the gratuitous. It has none of the spiritual warrant of (say) a phrase from the Psalmist, but it has pretty well the same claim on memory.

Talking, after all, is often a way of trying to find out what the devil is going on: and even the most suavely suited and grandly capped individuals are bushed about that for much of the time. Solemnity is commonly about three-quarters bluff, and the existence of countless institutions which might be called Solemnity Clubs dotted over our fragile ball of dirt and water does not change that fact. Auden, near the end of his poem, 'In Praise of Limestone', says, 'The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,/ Having nothing to hide.' Not being the blessed, and having much to hide above all, our not being the blessed we care greatly. Perelman does not care, and storms upon us accordingly.

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4 Leigh Hunt, 'Abou Ben Adhem', in *Leigh Hunt, Selected Writings*, ed. David Jesson (Carcanet, 2003), p. 59

Unlike various would-be grandees of cultural life, Perelman knows that there is no way out of the ignominies of the verbal circus. St John's Gospel, in the tender and momentous formulation, says that 'the Word was made flesh', the best words in the world, so far as I am concerned. But human flesh, and its language, is also 'flash', as in that great Australian expression, 'as flash as a rat with a gold tooth'. All of our flair is the flair of approximators, compromisers: as, first, an American Mr Big, and then an Australian one, said in response to the question, 'what do you do?' 'I do the best I can'. Language does the best it can, is gesticulant, often unshaven, not always well coordinated. Language both makes a gift of us to one another, and gives us away. It is what we all are, for better and for worse. And when, in the second of Perelman's beginnings, the speaker goes on locking one small shield into another unwary, '... not descry ... disingenuous ... untainted ... unerring ...', this, while ludicrous, also makes overt a permanent anxiety. Language is often padding, but padding as buffering. We keep saying things lest silence should say its terrible word to us. All of those welded negatives carry the flash of fear.

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To have that, too, come home, along with more precious things, it is necessary to take time, at least occasionally; slow is beautiful. The curious convention of poetry whereby, usually, it is out there on the page's white arena, space around it made obvious, can also suggest to us an advantage in time's being made 'spacious', time's being given its time. For some reasons, it is not our practice to attach to poems the regulatory signals we take for granted with music, no 'allegro', no 'prestissimo', but psychic pacing is of an importance which can hardly be exaggerated in poetry. Getting that wrong is like getting wrong the timing of a space-capsule's docking.

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In the Poseidon story, the god is not only earth-shaker and ocean-perturber, but palace-dweller and wall-builder. Somewhere between these conditions

is the origination of horses, those creatures which can stand either for untrammelled vitality or for disciplines and harmonies. Most if not all of what we read has a stake in both sides of this relationship. Rhetoric, whether seen or heard, is like music at least in this, that it is completely unintelligible unless it takes place between the poles of formulation and investigation. The purposes in question may be very various instruction, edification, entertainment, surprise, description and so on but there is a basic dynamic that can never be eluded, however eager the writer may be to do that. Much of the time there is no such eagerness, and the words become a kind of festival of accepted contrast. A favourite of mine in this regard has always been G. K. Chesterton, an essayist to the last which is to say, a maker, savourer, and releaser of tensions. Here he is, on 'The Advantages of Having One Leg':

To appreciate anything we must always isolate it, even if the thing itself symbolize something other than isolation. If we wish to see what a house is it must be a house in some uninhabited landscape. If we wish to depict what a man really is we must depict a man alone in a desert or on a dark sea sand. So long as he is a single figure he means all that humanity means; solitary he means human society; so long as he is solitary he means sociability and comradeship. Add another figure and the picture is less human – not more so. One is company, two is none. If you wish to symbolize human building draw one dark tower on the horizon; if you wish to symbolize light let there be no star in the sky. Indeed, all through that strangely lit season that we call our day there is but one star in the sky – a large fierce star which we call the sun. One sun is splendid; six suns would be only vulgar. One Tower of Giotto is sublime; a row of Towers of Giotto would be only like a row of white posts. The poetry of art is in beholding the single tower; the poetry of nature in seeing the single tree; the poetry of love in following the single woman; the poetry of religion in worshipping the single star. And so, in the same pensive lucidity, I find the poetry of all human anatomy in standing on a single leg. To express complete and perfect leggishness the leg must stand in sublime isolation, like the tower in the wilderness. As Ibsen so finely says, the strongest leg is that which stands most alone . . .⁵

5 G. K. Chesterton, 'The Advantages of Having One Leg' in G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (Cosimo Inc. reprint, 2007), pp. 21-22

People will, and should, write about anything; Montaigne on 'thumbs' is a case in point because people will do anything. (Many decades after Chesterton wrote his essay, the *London Times* reported, on the 18th of July 1957, that a Sydney orthopaedic specialist was leading a research party into Arnhem Land to investigate the Aboriginal phenomenon of standing on one leg.) Chesterton's assumption was that, since everything is ultimately connected with everything else, all may shed light on one another. This is not to say there is no such thing as implausibility, and those who dislike either his opinions or his demeanour are quick to point this out. In the course of his long and immensely copious life as a writer, G. K. Chesterton would sometimes jibe at being called a paradox-monger, but that is what he became on off-days or when one King Charles' Head or another bobbed up over his horizon. Still, the sloshing around of paradox when nothing else came to mind was a carelessness about something for which he usually cared deeply and passionately, namely his conviction that for us to be at all is at once gratuitous, essentially benign, and relational. In that sense, he did know where he was going to come out, whatever he was writing about: but it is a pretty expansive 'where'.

He wrote, as many do, partly for the drama of the thing, and one avenue to drama is the subjunctive. His 'If we wish' and 'If you wish' are signals to the reader to be on the *qui vive*, challenged and challenging. Chesterton seems to have assumed that the human mind is usually on the verge of wandering off an assumption which I believe to be perfectly true and it had constantly to be twitched back into concentration. No doubt his view was in part a consequence of his being a journalist, but many a writer who has had little to do with that trade writes as though we need all the psychic exercise we can get if we are to go the writer's way. More significantly, the drama of writing and of reading can be an implicit ritualising of everything that is large and persuasive in the conduct of our lives, which, from their most to their least material conditions, are a tissue of firmness and fluidity, of stopping and going.

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At its simplest, verse celebrates this; its rhythms, crude or subtle, answer to rhythms in our seated or lying bodies as well as in our bodies on the move. Verse's 'measures,' however described, have a constant traffic with our minds' 'measures' in the face of the blizzard of events through whose thousands or millions we make our way daily. And prose is another device whereby we do more than itemise, more than denominate: it exercises us in continuing insight, and helps us, as we say, to realise things. Chesterton was, often, a better-than-average versifier, though rarely a good poet; the prose, by contrast, was a milieu in which he could, time after time, be reborn as a knowing being.

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One thing he knew, and continued to report upon, was that, if we need to move through oceans of significance, we also need, frequently, to fling through the air of play; Chesterton was a kind of dolphin of the mind, moving fast through complementary elements. His love of play was partly a love of art, partly a love of life. All those subjunctives his, but also the millions of them that thread their way through writings remembered and forgotten are in part play, are esprit, just as every artistic innovation, not only from one performer to another but from one performance to another, is gambitry, in liberty. And what Yeats calls 'life's own self-delight,' whether in urchin can-kicking or in Olympic virtuosity or in the invention of the telescope or the gene-shear, all this is spirit on the wing, whatever its great or little palpable yield. Writing cannot and should not be saying this expressly all the time; sometimes we need the tranquil, and sometimes we need the dire. But play will out wherever life shows its hand in a big way, and Chesterton found it his business and his pleasure to be there and say so as often as possible. He could also, as with Ibsen, mock without hating, a rarer gift than it sounds.

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Inventiveness and conjecture, however vibrant, share a cosmos with all the matters of fact, and sooner or later have to cut deals with them. In the seventeenth century, Andrew Marvell, like many of his intellectual comrades, could go on

entertaining possibilities with an almost unending fluency, 'Meanwhile the mind/ from pleasure less,/ Withdraws into its happiness:/ The mind, that ocean where each kind/ Does straight its own resemblance find; Yet it creates, transcending these,/ Far other worlds, and other seas . . .'⁶ But Marvell also had the business of being a Member of Parliament for Hull, not the most oceanic of milieux, and other poems of his have the reek of the pragmatic and the politic. The rest of us, however enchantable, wake to worlds in which we too have to manoeuvre, sometimes flummoxed, sometimes cynical, frequently provisional, and always, whether or not we like it, exposed. Here is Diane Ackerman, in her *A Natural History of the Senses*, doing the daily thing in a more-than-ephemeral way:

Look at your feet. You are standing in the sky. When we think of the sky, we tend to look up, but the sky actually begins at the earth. We walk through it, yell into it, rake leaves, wash the dog, and drive cars in it. We breathe it deep within us. With every breath, we inhale millions of molecules of sky, heat them briefly; and then exhale them back into the world. At this moment, you are breathing some of the same molecules once breathed by Leonardo da Vinci, William Shakespeare, Anne Bradstreet, or Colette. Inhale deeply. Think of *The Tempest*. Air works the bellows of our lungs, and it powers our cells. We say 'light as air' but there is nothing light-weight about our atmosphere, which weighs 5,000 trillion tons. Only a clench as stubborn as gravity's could hold it to the earth; otherwise it would simply float away and seep into the cornerless expanse of space.

Without thinking, we often speak of 'an empty sky'. But the sky is never empty. In a mere ounce of air, there are 1,000 billion trillion gyrating atoms made up of oxygen, nitrogen, and hydrogen, each a menagerie of electrons, quarks, and ghostly neutrinos. Sometimes we marvel at how 'calm' the day is, or how 'still' the night. Yet there is no stillness in the sky or anywhere else where life and matter meet. The air is always vibrant and aglow, full of volatile gases, staggering spores, dust, viruses, fungi, and animals, all stirred by a skirling and relentless wind. There are active flyers like butterflies, birds, bats, and insects who ply the air roads; and there are passive flyers

6 Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. George deF. Lord (Everyman, 1984), p. 48

like autumn leaves, pollen, or milkweed pods, which just float. Beginning at the earth and stretching up in all directions, the sky is the thick, twitching realm in which we live. When we say that our distant ancestors crawled out onto the land, we forget to add that they really moved from one ocean to another, from the upper fathoms of water to the deepest fathoms of air.⁷

The American philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, once called the phases of education those of 'romance, precision, and generalisation'.⁸ This does very well not only for protracted disciplinary activity but for pieces of writing as short as Ackerman's. Without 'romance', the engrossment factor, the demon of boredom takes over the management straight away; without 'precision' – names, dates, places, numbers – we wonder, or should, whether somebody is just making hypnotic passes; without 'generalisation' – the mind in its sweeping mode it is not so much that we all will feel stockaded in among things smaller than ourselves, it is rather that any old passer-by who throws us a few slogans is likely to capture our restive attention.

Whether by accident or by design, Ackerman's kind of writing offers a triple satisfaction. First, she 'romances', by way of the exotic and the various. All of us not cursed with unequivocal adulthood like to gape a bit from time to time, and for some the magicking force will attach to Colette's name, for some to the cumulus of scientific detail, for some to 'estrangement' as such horizon at our feet, oceanic water meeting oceanic air, the great hand of gravity with all the atmosphere in its fist. Engrossment, too, can be reinforced by the switches from one rhetorical gesture or pitch to another from command or appeal, through position and counter-position, to the proffering of one comprehensible detail to another. It all sounds animated, sounds energetic and appealing; listening to it, we know not only that something is going on but that someone is coming through.

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7 Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (Random House, 1990), pp. 236-37

8 A. N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (Ernest Benn Limited, second edition, 1959), pp. 28-30

As for 'precision', and besides the obvious particularities, Ackerman is up to one of the oldest intellectual games of the West, the imprinting of macrocosm and microcosm upon each other. The ancient saying that 'man is the measure of all things' can be construed in many ways, and among them is the sense in which we can gauge things partly by finding ourselves at home in them, as the familiar car clears the familiar gate-post, or the tall householder the low lintel. Careers, fortunes, masterpieces and nightmares have been made, of course, from a contrasting sense that we don't fit, aren't wanted, and will always be unspeakable, but that is not the only option, and is certainly not Ackerman's. *The Tempest* in airy nature, the washed dog in the sky, our very naming of anything and everything to which we turn our attention, this is a dovetailing of self into milieu, and a scanning, and a spanning. What is to be made of all this exercises as many people as ever, no doubt: but that something is to be made of it, and never without us, is one of the elementary givens of any humanism, whose fashionable enemies are inescapably parasitic upon it at every turn.

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And 'generalisation' interests us sometimes for straightforward reasons of codification, while we herd the genera of some realm or other; grown men and women can love taxonomy as small boys once loved toy soldiers, regiment by regiment, But I think that our taste for generalisation is also a sign of an appetite that is emotional, and ethical, and ontological. We hanker for the lot: that sky, that ocean, have got into our hearts. Autism is a dreadful affliction, though all of us flirt with it from time to time; the bid of generalisation is one of the ways in which we act against it. Generalisation has its own pathologies, and its own appalling complacencies – somebody could write a play about them, to be called *Waiting for Drongo* – but it is quite impossible to do without it, and at our best, as well as at our worst, we don't want to. It, too, is a way to 'inhale deeply', a way to keep a few strokes ahead of vengeful Poseidon.



Past, Present, Future: Poetry as the Mind in Love

In Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, the best-known sentence is the one that runs, 'Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future.' Debates, not always civil, have raged as to how far Vonnegut himself endorses such a verdict, but they are none of our business here. Poets, presumably, have neither more command nor less than anybody else over those three phases of our existence, but it is my view that when they write with one or another of such phases in mind, their work may characteristically be illuminated or fortified in distinctive ways, and I hope that this will emerge from what I have to say here.

As for the second part of my title, it assumes a couple of things which are easily overlooked when poetry is being discussed. One of these is that all poetry, everywhere, is an intellectual act, an intellectual action. Poetry may be suffused with feeling and energized by imagination, but because all of its fabric is linguistic, it is, as we might say, 'witted' through and through – is, to borrow an expression from another quarter, mental as anything. The other thing to be said of the title's second part is that it takes as a given what Plato would have called the mind's *eros* – its being, constitutively, a yearner and a lover. Of course, darker views, many of them, are possible when one thinks of the mind, but this is mine, and it does have its uses, as I hope that you may come to agree.

I shall frame what I have to say in terms of three poems, the first of which is
Gwen Harwood's 'In the Middle of Life'.

Hopeless in middle age to soften
those hearts long petrified by hate,
or melt from features loved so often
in friendship's warmth, their desolate
mantle of self-sustaining spite.
We see ourselves, in callous light,

stripped of the vanity that conjured
for everyone an emperor's suit.
Who can drink flattery uninjured,
or banquet on illusion's fruit?
Unwelcome nourishment, but real,
is truth's unpalatable meal.

We need our enemies to teach us
what friends in kindness never show.
Where magnanimity can't reach us
the darts of hatred lodge and glow,
lighting our follies and pretensions,
our self-esteem's absurd dimensions.

Think of a still-life painter toiling
to keep the bloom of life intact,
fish, fruit and blossom slowly spoiling
while his brush holds the flowers erect,
the fruit unwrinkled, and the flesh
sea-lustred on the stinking fish.

All that can perish falls apart.
 The labours of self-love can cease.
 But in that gallery of the heart
 where memory hangs each masterpiece
 of things unalterably past,
 the wisdom and the pain will last.¹

We say, sometimes, ‘that’s history’, meaning that while events can be revisited in memory they cannot be changed: for good or ill, they are crystallized for ever. The footnotes to ‘that’s history’ may be many, and the character of the crystals be much disputed, but there is a metaphysical gulf between then’s realities and now’s. That state of affairs lends itself to the kind of attention displayed in Harwood’s poem, which might be said to be in love with the sized-up, the finished, the bridled. True, the present and even the future may be addressed in a lapidary spirit, as any collection of aphorisms is likely to show, but the past in its resistance to alteration (though not of course to reconstrual) seems peculiarly congenial to the aphoristic spirit: all its zeitgeist, we could say, is gestalt.

Harwood’s poetry is thoroughly at home with the bridled, whose other name would include terms like wit, rhyme, metrical patency, appropriated tradition, George Herbert’s ‘something understood’, and the apollonian. Edith Sitwell wrote an unendearing autobiography called *Taken Care Of*, but in a sense a great deal of poetry is devoted to ‘taking care of’ what is so, perhaps especially when what is so is the past itself. Epitaphs tend to have clean edges, and so do conscious, necessarily selective, apprehensions of things past.

But it is what I am calling ‘the bridled’ that can attract the mind willing to love. When Keats says, in a letter, ‘I look upon fine Phrases like a Lover,’ it is, I sense, their precision as well as their vividness which courts him: every good romantic, after all, keeps a classical twin in his or her attic. The

1 Gwen Harwood, ‘In the Middle of Life’, in Harwood, *Collected Poems 1943-1995*, ed. Alison Hoddinott & Gregory Kratzmann (University of Queensland Press, 2003), p. 266

gambits adopted towards 'bridling' can be many in poetry, as indeed in prose. Like many another schoolboy limping his way through Julius Caesar's presentation of his career as a Roman conquistador, I was struck by his switching from the past to the historic present, all the while couching things in the third person; the abruptions from one keying of attention to another themselves contributed to a sense of the writer's command not only of events but of his reader's consciousness. There is an analogy between that state of affairs and what is being pointed to by Simone Weil when she remarks that 'A poet in the arrangement of words and the choice of each word, must simultaneously bear in mind matters on at least five or six different planes of composition'.² The 'bearing in mind' of which Weil speaks is not of course a matter of explicit calculation, but it is a long way from spontaneous jugglery, at least in any poetry of genuine aspiration.

In love with the bridled . . . Hearing such an expression, some may be moved to murmur Roy Campbell's short poem, 'On Some South African Novelists': 'You praise the firm restraint with which they write/ I'm with you there, of course:/ They use the snaffle and the curb all right,/ But where's the bloody horse?'³ As a matter of fact, this is exactly the kind of thing which could have been written by the author of 'In the Middle of Life'. That title, and the first two lines, 'Hopeless in middle age to soften/ those hearts long petrified by hate' in effect beckon the Dante of the *Inferno's* beginning, and indeed of that often-hate-laced work as a whole: and Harwood's poem no more gives up on the interplay between thrust and stand in the writing than Dante does. The 'bloody horse' is there to be sensed in 'Who can drink flattery uninjured,/ or banquet on illusion's fruit', in 'Where magnanimity can't reach us/ the darts of hatred lodge and glow', in 'our self-esteem's absurd dimensions', in 'the wisdom and the pain will last.' The bloody horse running here is called '*J'accuse*', and the rider's name is 'I Told You So': paired as they are, they establish a distinctive dynamic.

2 Simone Weil, q. in *Geoffrey Hill, Collected Critical Works*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 573

3 Roy Campbell, 'On Some South African Novelists' in Roy Campbell, *Adamastor* (Faber and Faber, 1930), p. 104

That last way of putting it prompts the observation that Harwood's array of metaphors itself makes for a certain 'bridling.' To say this may seem surprising, in that her sequence is copious with novelty and is in effect a tissue of metamorphoses: the poem's run moves through references to softening, petrefaction, melting, clothing, light, disguise, drinking and eating, teaching, showing, darts, more light, dimensions, painting, rotting, supporting, stilling, shining, stinking, collapsing, labouring, a gallery, masterpieces, the past, wisdom, and pain. Is this not a running wild? Well, no, it isn't, in that Harwood moves in a genuinely associative way from one point to another, eliding the explicit connections which a writer of prose might feel bound to make in order to maintain its decorum, but still with a sense that a certain matching or chiming of realities is called for within a poem both doctrinal in its demeanour and emphatically formal in its ordonnance. The mutation from vanity to emperor's suit to the drinking of flattery to banquet to illusion to truth's unpalatable meal, for example, has a logic which is at once obvious and strenuous.

The poet James Richardson, in one of his aphorisms refers to 'The despair of the blank page: it is so full.'⁴ Like any decent paradox, this tells a truth. Before our mental intervention, the world, and any conceivable world, is to us the equivalent of the 'tohu/bohu', the formless void, of the opening of the book of Genesis. A writer like Gwen Harwood, sensible of this fact, again seizes opportunities to 'chime', as I am calling it, one fact or feature with another. Having a mind of notable imaginative hospitality, she is much exposed to the flooding factor – the 'fullness' of the blank page: but having a mind of instinctive discipline, she is constantly reaching to identify patterns and parities, the 'this goes with that' of a well-known supplier of clothing.

Such 'chiming' finds one of its expressions in the poem's deployment of stanzas. The word itself, Italian for 'a room,' is evocative in that the little house of a poem may put on display rooms which, although structurally identical in their essentials, nonetheless accommodate subtly different phases of living. In this case, the first stanza, without any provisions or concessions,

4 James Richardson, *Interglacial: New and Selected Poems and Aphorisms* (Ausable Press, 2004), p. 215

establishes an air of the absolute: that 'Hopeless' looks like a last word as well as a first. The second stanza, while not retreating from that position, raises at least the possibility that the best, an austere best, may yet be made of this very bad job, while the third stanza invokes enemies as teachers and confirmers – a disconcerting pedagogy, something undertaken on the off-chance that we may to a degree be what Swift calls, with a mixture of aloofness and scorn, 'docible animals.' The fourth stanza invites us into the poem's rhetoric, with its 'Think of a still-life painter toiling/ to keep the bloom of life intact', so that we may become witnesses, in both senses of the word, to the profoundly ironic affair which is from one perspective a 'stilling' of life and from another what the French call *nature morte*. And the final stanza completes a round to the absoluteness of the beginning, with its 'All that can perish falls apart' and its 'the wisdom and the pain will last.' The house is a whole, but the animation varies from room to room.

You may sense from my way of speaking that I am also inclined to think of this poem, and indeed many others, as being dramatic in character, plays in little. This is true, and it could scarcely be otherwise insofar as I think of the life of the mind as moving in some such direction. When rhetoric, the art of persuasion, is investigated, not only does it turn out to be unremittingly dramatic, it turns out to be efficacious inasmuch as it appeals, for all of its artifice, to what is 'naturally' the bent and aspiration of our comparatively untutored minds. It is, for example, impossible for the asking of any question, however banal, not to be dramatic – a move is being made and a countermove is being solicited, innocently or otherwise. All the knowledge in the world may be said to depend upon those humble-seeming words, 'and' and 'but': they are the hinges on which, conceptually, the cosmos swings. A poem need not put on philosophical airs or, as used be said of a priest-metaphysician I once knew, pray in syllogisms: but even in its elisions, even in its strategically deployed silences, even if it originates from what W. H. Auden would call 'the Francophile/ gaggle of pure songsters', it will depend for its precision and its force upon permanent dispositions of the mind which are quest-like in their intent, dramatic in their interventions.

In her book *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman remarks that 'the latest findings in physiology suggest that *the mind* doesn't really dwell in the brain but travels the whole body on caravans of hormones and enzymes, busily making sense of the compound wonders we catalogue as touch, taste, smell, hearing, vision.'⁵ She is thinking like a poet in speaking in that way, and the expression may alert us to the fact that 'In the Middle of Life' does expressly invoke each of what Auden, again, addresses as a 'precious five.' And this, like the rhetorical and the dramatic features of the poem of which I have just been speaking, is another instance of 'bridling,' another move 'from a wild to a formal vineyard.' Poetry is an art of the whole being. Insofar as we are fractured, or fractious, this too may seek utterance, witness an immense amount of poetry good, bad and indifferent. But poetry as the whole being's cry, confession, calculation or choice, might have been discovered as if in illustration of the medieval philosophical dictum that there is nothing in the mind which is not mediated by the senses. As go the precious five, so, sooner or later, goes the poem.

In this as in many other of her poems, Gwen Harwood may be said to be in love with 'the bridled,' to be a sponsor of the determined and the 'chiming.' We are in different territory when we come to a poem by W. S. Merwin, called 'Ill Wind':

As long as the south wind keeps thrashing the green branches
 caught in themselves so that they twist trying to find
 somewhere
 else to be left in peace while the wind-scorched leaves wither
 curl and are snatched away whipped in the hissing rush
 over restless litter and cracked ground until the boughs
 groan crash finally snap striking back flailing
 finding as they fall the vain gestures of feelings
 never to be known and thick trunks split and the tender
 seedlings lie down and shrivel and we sleep lightly

5 Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (Vintage Books, 1990)

as dust to be wakened by wind wearing at us
 from inside all through the gray dark and into
 the bleached morning attaching itself to us
 dragging us keeping at us weighing upon us
 like rumors of dreaded news sapping us wherever
 we turn until we suspect it of having a mind
 devious implacable malevolent that we
 cannot but recognize while denying it we are sharing
 that apprehension with ancestors many as leaves
 this was the scourge of harvests that devastated
 vineyards sent roofs sailing brought down the big trees
 those who have watched over the lives of things have known it
 wherever they were and reminded themselves that always
 it went as it came and the fragile green survived it.⁶

Merwin's poem is one of a number written in memory and in celebration of a French country milieu in which he lived for some time. One by one, these poems in effect constitute a world and, as far as possible, confirm it. I say 'as far as possible,' since from his first book, *A Mask for Janus*, published in 1952, a central motif in his writings has been the evanescence of things. Paul Valéry wrote once, 'God made everything out of nothing, and the nothingness shows through,' and whatever of the theology, the predicament is peculiarly evident to some writers, of whom Merwin is one. To the vexation of some readers, Merwin has been offering variations on this theme for most of his long creative life. Paradoxically, though, he has also been a poet with a pronounced sense of copiousness, especially when it comes to addressing the natural world – with which he sees the human species as being intimately, though sometimes lethally, associated. He is capable of writing very economically, while indicating in a few words a world of experience; but he can also, as in 'Ill Wind,' proceed in almost Mozartian fashion to vary and amplify an essential theme. And this is a case of what I call the mind in love with the *unbridled*.

6 W. S. Merwin, 'Ill Wind,' in W. S. Merwin, *The Vixen* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p.12

In this twenty-three-line poem, which, like many of Merwin's, eschews punctuation, there are three sentences, two in the last five lines, and one in the first eighteen: the main verb in the first sentence is deferred until the seventeenth line. Before that point, the syntax of the sentence has the air of a negotiable labyrinth, a James-like structure which complements the attention even while challenging it. That is one kind of copiousness: the whole poem, so to speak, is stitched with the colour of complexity. Beyond that, the poem is obviously indebted to alliteration as a structural device – something, incidentally, which Merwin has long valued as an endowment received from Anglo-Saxon and medieval poetry. Alliteration, handled skillfully, works both to stabilize and to propel things metrically, to cut a deal between form and flow, something which anyone listening, for example, to Seamus Heaney's reading of his translation of *Beowulf* may quickly identify.

There is a third kind of copiousness informing 'Ill Wind', to be seen in the fourteen runners out of the 'thrashing . . . trying . . . hissing' stable, and in their cousins: 'feelings' and 'seedlings'. In principle, vowels go on endlessly, and in that respect a poem is a process, which is not to be bounded by its attainments at any particular point. There are many ways of interpreting Michael Longley's remark that if prose is a river, poetry is a fountain;⁷ but attention to its syntactical investments is one of the most important. It seems to me that in 'Ill Wind', those investments are calculated to evoke a sense of vast processes about and beyond the world, processes aptly characterized in terms of the wind, but, like the wind, they are unamenable to any governing we might attempt. To put it differently, while Merwin is indeed speaking of a south wind specific to a particular place, speaking of its coming and its going, he is also displaying some of that potency of attention which is poetry's real aspiration. Calvin Bedient remarks that 'In a poem there is no past; at its inception, everything has yet to be done, felt, imagined.'⁸ I think that in any striking poem one senses that what comes to be 'done, felt, imagined' is itself an enhanced access to insight, *and* to assent, compared with what was available before reading that

7 Michael Longley, q. in *The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations*, ed. Dennis O'Driscoll (Bloodaxe, 2006), p. 116

8 Calvin Bedient, q. in *The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations*, p. 25

poem. Poets write, it seems to me, to expatriate themselves from their present countries of the mind, and to patriate themselves in new countries whose names they do not know, and whose number cannot be counted.

I shall revisit this consideration when we come to my third poem. For the present we have to do with – well, the present. Poems are citizens of the present as we all are, which is to say, dispersedly as well as in concentration. Each of us, physically and psychologically and perhaps in other ways too, is both a system-for-stability and a system-for-change. Ronald Johnson, in his book *Ark*, says, “The human eye, a sphere of waters and tissue, absorbs an energy that has come ninety-three million miles from another sphere, the sun. The eye may be said to be sun in other form.”⁹ True, and true too that every day we veil and unveil our eyes to that condition, in the strange process we call sleep. We present ourselves to the world, the world to ourselves, not only via bedroom and bathroom and all the rest of it, but via the psychic entrances and exits which make up so much of our conscious being, entrances and exits which are (again) dramatized in obvious and in subtle ways in poetry’s arts. That drama, we may say, is one in which there is a dance between ‘present’ as supposed stasis, ‘present’ as theatrical initiative, ‘present’ as unearned donation, and ‘present!’ as attested presence. Each of these belongs in a language game of its own, but poetry is like an Olympic Games into which the several games have been subsumed, and in whose context, from time to time at least, those individual games may be re-envisaged.

If the ghost of Samuel Taylor Coleridge happened to be flitting through these pages, I imagine that he would by this time be a vexed spirit in that, as a sponsor of attention to the natural world and its ways, and as a cherisher of the notion of *natura naturans* – broadly, ‘nature a-naturing’ – he would be asking what has become of that world-in-little of the wind-invaded trees, which so clearly possesses the poet: and if a spectral Percy Bysshe Shelley were also to hand, he might well be demanding some allusion at least to that comparably airborne poem, his own ‘Ode to the West Wind’. Each of them would have a point. ‘Ill Wind’ is engaging partly in virtue of the rush and press of

9 Ronald Johnson, q. in Donald Revell, *The Art of Attention: A Poet’s Eye* (Graywolf Press, 2007), p. 24

the language which emulates the processes it registers: and to some degree the poem is fortified by its analogies, even amidst disparities, with works traditional to particular imaginations, whatever tea-cup tempests about canonicity may be in vogue. That said, I should plead, gently, that it is of the very nature of the plenitude I find in many poems that it can be addressed only serially. If a fifty-year-old memory is to be trusted, Chesterton said of Dickens that all you can do with him is walk round him, cap in hand; that deferentiality is rarer nowadays, but the process may still be appropriate, as it certainly is, often, when contemplating poetry.

It would be overdoing it to say that poetry is ‘the mind in love with “the lot”’, since, given the lot we have, that would be a mindless way to be, or at least grievously inattentive. In ‘Ill Wind’, Merwin is patently rejoicing in the vitality of his own language, so that in effect we have a sombre celebration: but ‘thrashing the green branches’, ‘sapping us wherever/ we turn’, or ‘the scourge of harvests that devastated/ vineyards’ cannot but trouble the most admiring of minds. Carlyle, who knew Tennyson, said that he was by custom ‘carrying a bit of Chaos about him which he is manufacturing into Cosmos’. For some poets, at least, the hankering to get the cosmic effect is matched by a hankering to do justice to the great spill of the chaotic – to the fact that, in Gerard Hopkins’s formulation, ‘Nature is a Heraclitean fire’.

But if ‘doing the grand’ has its place in poetry, as it does in other parts of life, there is grand and grand. In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats asks, ‘Is it not certain that the creator yawns in earthquake and thunder and other popular displays, but toils in rounding the delicate spiral of a shell?’¹⁰ This is not *au fond* a theological question, but it is what one might call in touch with ultimates – in touch with the bearing of the detailed and the beautiful on supposedly larger issues or questions. I have for some time been fascinated by the figure of Alberto Giacometti, drawing his brother Diego again and again, month after month, seeking an exactness readily conceivable but almost unattainable. That, surely, was a quest for the unbridled, for something to be displayed only insofar as it could be discerned, a discernment itself

10 W. B. Yeats, ‘Autobiographies’, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, Vol. III, ed. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas Archibald (Scribner, 1963), p. 166

offered only in the process of sought display. It is, to me, an emblem of poetic aspiration at its most admirable: and everything about it is delicate.

The mind in love with the bridled, the past being its sign: the mind in love with the unbridled, the present being its sign. Our final poem is by Les Murray, its title being ‘The Future’. I think of it as standing, in several ways, for the mind’s love of the mysterious. So, ‘The Future’.

There is nothing about it. Much science fiction is set there
but is not about it. Prophecy is not about it.
It sways no yarrow stalks. And crystal is a mirror.
Even the man we nailed to a tree for a lookout
said little about it; he told us evil would come.
We see, by convention, a small living distance into it
but even that’s a projection. And all our projections
fail to curve where it curves.

It is the black hole
out of which no radiation escapes to us.
The commonplace and magnificent roads of our lives
go on some way through cityscape and landscape
or steeply sloping, or scree, into that sheer fall
where everything will be that we have ever sent there,
compacted, spinning – except perhaps us, to see it
It is said we see the start.

But, from here, there’s a blindness.
The side-heaped chasm that will swallow all our present
blinds us to the normal sun that may be imagined
shining calmly away on the far side of it, for others
in their ordinary day. A day to which all our portraits,
ideals, revolutions, denim and deshabelle
are quietly heartrending. To see these people is impossible,
to greet them, mawkish. Nonetheless, I begin:

‘When I was alive –’
 and I am turned around
 to find myself looking at a cheerful picnic party,
 the women decently legless, in muslin and gloves,
 the men in beards and weskits, with the long
 cheroots and duck trousers of the better sort,
 relaxing on a stone verandah. Ceylon, or Sydney.
 And as I look, I know they are utterly gone,
 each one on his day, with pillow, small bottles, mist,
 with all the futures they dreamed or dealt in, going
 down to that engulfment everything approaches;
 with the man on the tree, they have vanished into the Future.¹¹

Perhaps to your surprise, I should say first that for a poet the enduringly mysterious thing is language itself – his or her language, which is also not ‘theirs’ at all, inasmuch as the range and depth of its possibilities can never be encompassed by one poet, or indeed by many. Wallace Stevens said that ‘In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and images with all your capacity to love anything at all,’¹² which might raise some eyebrows, but which is along the right lines, I think: and the fact is that the better loved either a person or something else may be, the more mysterious, not less, the person or the something becomes. Joseph Brodsky alludes to a people, perhaps the Scythians, who were astonished at their own language: in that sense, poets who have their wits about them all have some Scythian blood. Les Murray has many gifts as a poet, among them what we might call lexical zest: I cannot believe that he was not pleased to have given a home in his poem to ‘yarrow’ and ‘scree,’ ‘denim and deshabelle,’ ‘weskits,’ ‘cheroots’ and ‘engulfment.’ In his prose work *Watt*, Samuel Beckett writes at one point, ‘. . . it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted.’ At some level, the

11 Les Murray, ‘The Future’, in Les Murray, *Collected Poems* (Black Inc., 2006), p. 153.

12 Wallace Stevens, ‘Adagia’, in *Opus Posthumous*. Wallace Stevens, ed. Samuel French Morse (Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 161

poet is comforted by saying what is so, with the greatest possible precision: but he or she may also be discomfited by the realization that the very precision of utterance contributes to the ‘making strange’ of the thing being named. In poetry, to denominate is not to domesticate: it is, curiously, to drive words wild.

Is this esoteric behaviour? Not really. Something analogous may be seen in that commonest of human property, the proverbs of various societies. There is a Scots proverb, ‘The proudest nettle grows on a midden,’ a Welsh, ‘The trumpet of death is a dry cough,’ a Danish, ‘Hope is the dream of the waking,’ an Estonian, ‘The eye is the richest of all,’ a Finnish, ‘Before us stands yesterday,’ a German, ‘Silence is a fence around wisdom,’ a Turkish, ‘The tongue has no bone, yet it crushes,’ a Kenyan, ‘The heart has no fallow ground,’ an Irish, ‘It’s the deaf people that make the lies.’ We might think of any of these as being half a poem already, a germinal poem, and each is offered both as sober truth and as something haunting. Similarly, the dicta of many who have written because they could not do otherwise have blended the pragmatic and the powerful in their way of framing things. Carlyle says, ‘The past is always attractive because it is drained of fear’: Goethe, ‘Nothing is more terrible than ignorance with spurs on’: Schiller, ‘Against stupidity the gods themselves struggle in vain.’ And then there are, blessedly, the begetters of words themselves – Bentham of ‘international,’ Sir Thomas Browne of ‘electricity,’ Chesterfield of ‘picnic,’ Dr Johnson of both ‘comic’ and ‘literature,’ Milton of ‘gloom’ and ‘impassive,’ Tennyson of ‘fairy tale,’ Tyndale of ‘broken-hearted.’ We may, with Byron – who gave us the word – have become ‘blasé’ about any or all such words, but all that that displays is the human propensity for going to sleep at the mental wheel.

That said, you will not expect me to ignore that feature of Murray’s poem to which we are pointed in its first line – its concern with the unsaid, and perhaps the unsayable. In Randall Jarrell’s poem, ‘A Sick Child,’ the child says, ‘If I can think of it, it isn’t what I want’; and in another of his poems, ‘I feel like the first men to read Wordsworth/ It’s so simple I can’t understand it’¹³. Edwin Muir’s ‘The Animals’ begins, ‘They do not live in the world/ And not in time

13 Randall Jarrell, ‘Sick Child’; ‘The One who was Different,’ in Jarrell, *The Complete Poems* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), pp. 53; 316-17

and space.¹⁴ Each of these ‘unsayings’ is a way of backing into the unknown, that being the only way available to the speakers. Recall the beginning of ‘The Future’: ‘There is nothing about it. Much science fiction is set there/ but is not about it. Prophecy is not about it./ It sways no yarrow stalks. And crystal is a mirror . . .’ This is to deny us what we might call an instinctive supposition – that there is some predictability, and that we have access to it – but it is to give us instead what the young these days might call an ‘awesome’ insight, something of the order of those black holes which, for many of us, are almost as arcane as mathematical surds. ‘Hints, followed by guesses’, T. S. Eliot says in ‘Four Quartets’, referring admittedly to moments of singular stillness, but touching too on a quality of attention which might come into play whenever some nay-saying is embraced as a strategy.

In some very disparate disciplines – theology for one, and scientific investigation for another – the path of negation, achieved or sought strategically, is indispensable. And Kenneth Burke’s dictum that ‘man is the inventor of the negative’ – though it finds spectacular expression in whole phases of poetry – may in fact be deployed in any imaginable intellectual context, as for example in the bulk of Metaphysical writing, as well as in much conscientiously Postmodern work.¹⁵ When surprise is being sought, and even celebrated, economy of expression is commonly a great advantage. (I am reminded of a couple of sentences in a newspaper report, which go: ‘The Lord’s Prayer contains 56 words, the Ten Commandments 297, the American Declaration of Independence 300. The European Economic Community Directive on the Export of Duck Eggs contains 26,911 words.’)¹⁶ The last line of ‘The Future’, ‘with the man on the tree, they have vanished into the Future’ is the more economically powerful in that that man on that tree is believed by many to be ‘rex quondam futurisque’, the Once and Future King, keeper of the lost, whether or not ‘of the better sort’ – crossed out, we might say, but still the annuller of annulment.

14 Edwin Muir, ‘The Animals’, in Muir, *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir*, ed. Peter H. Butter, (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1991), p. 207

15 For Kenneth Burke’s theoretical approach, see the essay in this book, ‘Poetry’s Fugitives: A Christian Hearing’.

16 Q. in *A Beggar in Purple: A Selection from the Commonplace Book of Rupert Hart-Davis* (Hamish Hamilton, 1983), p. 31

‘The world is too much with us,’ Wordsworth wrote: is the future too much for us? And my last reflection has to do with another ‘too muchness’ with which poetry’s mind may be said to be in love, and that is beauty. In most discourse in which contemporary critics and theoreticians have a ball, beauty is the Cinderella who isn’t invited. There are reasons for this, though in my view few good ones: but one consequence is that if, as Peter Jay says, ‘We look to poetry for the thisness that it encapsulates, and the otherness which it evokes’¹⁷, one truly formidable instance of ‘the otherness,’ namely beauty, is deemed to be as invisible as a servant in a Whig grandee’s house. Yes, yes, an element in the attribution of beauty derives from the individual consciousness – but since when have we been so nervous about that factor which, in theoretical discussion, often seems a virtually oceanic concern? And yes, beauty is a conception which may be as polyvalent as its old transcendental siblings, one-ness, truth and goodness – but why should the poetical imagination, that protean thing, be doubted in its capacity to do at least a limping justice to it, as, sometimes, to them? Seamus Heaney has claimed that ‘If poetry breaks its covenant with truth and justice, it has failed,’ and for my money you can put beauty in the list as well.¹⁸

We live in a time when ‘God’ has lost its capital letter and ‘Theory’ acquired one. No doubt, crestfallen for a while, the deity will soldier on, but Theory, like all crowned heads, is in danger of hubris. To my mind, little if anything compares with acknowledged beauty, that blaze of being, for the inducing of sobriety in one way and the lifting of the heart in another. I would make my own the words of David Bentley Hart when he says,

The beautiful is not a fiction of desire, nor is its nature exhausted by a phenomenology of pleasure; it can be recognized in despite of desire, or as that toward which desire must be cultivated. There is an overwhelming given-ness in the beautiful, and it is discovered in astonishment, in an awareness of something fortuitous, adventitious, essentially indescribable; it is known only in the moment of response, from the position of one already addressed and able now only to reply . . .¹⁹

17 Peter Jay, q. in ed. O’Driscoll, *The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations*, p. 132

18 Seamus Heaney, q. in ed. O’Driscoll, *The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations*, p. 94

19 David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Eerdmans, 2003) p. 17

I am not attempting, of course, to attribute just this view to Les Murray, even in 'The Future' which is surely among the most commanding of his poems. But in its own version of 'nuance and scruple', its accommodation of both simplicity and irony, its quiet *terribilità*, it does belong in the country of the beautiful. As such, it may also serve as a reminder that if love is, as Emerson calls it, the 'bright foreigner, the foreign self', it is in the end no more a stranger than the mind we thought we knew so well.



Peter Porter: Littoral Truth^I

In an essay on the poetry of George Crabbe, Peter Porter wrote, ‘It is a great pleasure to me, a man for the littoral any day, to read Crabbe’s description of the East Anglian coast.’ Happily, there is by now a substantial and various array of writings about Porter’s work, and I would like simply to add that his being, metaphorically ‘a man for the littoral,’ with all its interfusions, is one of his distinguishing qualities, and something to rejoice in. Coastlands, and marches, are essential to his intellect and to his imagination. He may never have had one foot in Eden, but he did rejoice in a plurality of territories. With a hallmark ruefulness, he would joke that the principal use of poetry was to supply novelists and film-makers with titles for what they produced: but he was himself a constant crosser of borders between prose and poetry, music and verse, the most sumptuous of visual works in western civilization and poems which might revere, chasten, or ironize them. He could mount a commanding array of insights while offering in the same breath a disarming modesty about their power. If ever there was a case of someone writing poems to see what happened, Peter Porter was the man – ‘for the littoral any day.’

^I All quotations from Peter Porter’s prose are taken from Peter Porter, *Saving from the Wreck: Essays on Poetry* (Trent Books, 2001).

‘The model for art remains that of metamorphosis: imaginations, great events, are all transformation scenes.’ This was Porter’s project, and it was besides his passion. He usually wrote poetry as, in my experience, he always spoke – rapidly, as if somehow to offer the trace of what was escaping, while the curiosity of what was emerging became apparent. In a zestfully mordant early poem, ‘Farewell to Theophrastus’, he reports that ‘*Overdoing It’s* lost a carnation but has/ two rosebuds in his right lapel;/ he offers the table the name of an hotel/ in Amalfi and spends a minute on his knees/ retrieving the Chairman’s pen top.’ This is like Swift singing – a startling spectacle, but one which wins assent through the blend of farce and calculation with which it is carried off. Porter wrote, later, ‘Satire I hold to be only another version of pastoral, a way poets have of managing to relish what they dislike. They have cause to bless their enemies for existing.’ This too is to be ‘a man for the littoral’, and it means that no day need be wasted.

Like Auden who was one of his exemplars, Porter could exult in a variety of modes, each of which had a mutable face. A handful of his poems’ titles insinuates a repertoire: ‘A Great Reckoning in a Little Room’, ‘The Lion of Antonello da Messina’, ‘The Pines of Rome’, ‘The Cocks of Campagnatico’, ‘Mutant Proverbs’, ‘Leafing Through the Latin Dictionary’, ‘Whereof We Cannot Speak’, ‘At the Reunion of the Answers’. Various, the demeanour could be that of applauder, of busker, of bearleader, of someone being put to silence eloquently, of wary enquirer, of a hailer of love in the presence of death, of a commander whose troops are prone, unpredictably, to desert him and then to return.

‘No poet can be great’, he wrote, ‘who is not memorable, unmistakable and a virtuoso’. He did not establish a priority between these endowments, but he certainly did not think that to be a virtuoso was to be an also-ran. He had from first to last a certain innocence, an openness, about a new poem’s coming to be. The poem could not be wrenched from the realm of the unknown: it could only be had where surprise and expertise were both allowed their due. The many expressions of surprise in the poems are not ornamental or strategic: they are, as we say, telling.

Like many poets, and in spite of a brightly-polished scepticism, Peter Porter had a number of talismanic predecessors. Pope was emphatically of their company, and so was Browning. Porter wrote that 'In his copious and generous output, Browning satisfies the unquenchable haranguer which is in each of us. We are born, we talk and we die. But chiefly we talk, and when we meet a good talker we listen. Browning is the talker *non pareil*. Any acquaintance of Peter Porter's will smile instinctively at this, because his own diurnal talking was itself a part of his own 'copious and generous output'.

Beyond that, though, the whole of his poetry may be seen as a deliberate talking-through of his way in the world. A rending poem after his first wife's death is called, 'Talking to You Afterwards', and some modification of that title could be used of the poems late and early. Answering questions after a poetry-reading in Australia some years ago, he said when asked whether he had an ideal reader, 'Yes, and it's me.' He meant by this that if the poem could not evade strictures which rose in his own mind, then it lost credibility. But even though he was sometimes charged with writing esoterically, he was disinclined, whether by temperament or by choice, to write poems which stood clear of the ruck of affairs, or which aspired to do so. If you missed the talking-through, you missed an important dimension of the poem.

Porter, who delighted to bestow and to modify characterisations in his poems, called Browning 'The Father of Us All', in that he 'changed the coordinates by which poetry is recognized . . . The chief gain was poetry's escape from a ghetto of appropriateness. The poet ate further down the table from the salt, but he ate more voraciously.' Porter saw this as a common indebtedness to Browning, but that way of putting it applies with special force to his own work. Many excellent poets work most happily within particular thickets in their own cultures: Peter Porter wanted a forest, and his poems keep on expanding its borders.

'The Father of Us All', himself a man for the littoral, might well be pleased with the degree to which Porter embraced the new opportunities. No doubt his deep and lasting fidelity to music taught him much about intellectual decorum and its range of possibilities, but his poetry still escaped the 'ghetto of appropriateness' with a zest of its own. Once again, titles give the cue: 'Syrup

of Figs Will Cast Out Fear,' 'Who Gets the Pope's Nose?,' 'Inspector Christopher Smart Calls,' 'In the Giving Vein,' 'Exit, Pursued by a Bear,' 'What I Have Written, I Have Written,' 'The Pantoum of the Opera.' Juan Ramón Jiménez advises, in a notebook: 'If they give you lined paper, write the other way,' which applies very well to Porter, provided it is remembered that 'the other way' thereupon becomes a new way, with both new opportunities and new requirements.

'The poet ate further down the table from the salt, but he ate more voraciously.' Nobody reading through the Porter ensemble could doubt the voracity. When it came to poetical reputation, he regretted that he was not nearer the salt, but where political affairs were at issue, the whole disposition of the table was up, at best, for critique. I am writing as it happens on the day of the British elections, which is also Porter's funeral-day. In a letter written shortly after the elections of 1997, he wrote, 'It struck me suddenly the other day that I suffer from the paranoia of not being political. If I were political I would see ways of changing things for the better – as it is, I can concentrate only on the appallingness of ruling classes and what might be called the transferable iniquity whereby their opposing Tribunes and Radical Replacements are forced to copy the sins of their office.' Camus, in a notebook, wrote, 'I am not made for politics, since I am incapable of desiring the death of my opponent.' Porter, a constant scrutinizer of mortality's ways, might not have desired the death of the powerful, but he thought that the least that should be given them was a hell of a good talking to, though he did not suppose that they would do much listening. Donald Hall remarks that 'Poetry weds the unweddable and embodies the conditions we live under: nest of pleasure, twigs of dread.' It might be a coda to Porter's, 'For a poet his hope and his benison will usually be his energy. What he has to say is often possessed by gloom, but he becomes of the party of hope if he pronounces it with energy and art. How he does so is a great and unexplained mystery.' Far more pages of his poetry than not bear witness to the attempt implied here, though the mystery, to me at least, remains as great as ever. Porter used to quote the exchange between Mozart and a (presumably thoughtless) enquirer, who asked him why he wrote so much. Mozart replied, 'Because it fatigues me less than not writing.' That says a good deal about Porter at the desk, whose hankering was always beyond the present poem or the next, and included the hope to understand 'the mystery'.

'All the poetry I love,' he said, 'is potential energy come to rest.' This lapidary phrasing, which for Porter could point to Herbert as to Rochester, to Shakespeare the sane and Smart the mad, to Pope and to Auden, is of a piece with his constant rethinking of the relationship between poetry and music. Dennis O'Driscoll's view that 'poetry is music set to words' would have been his own, though he would instinctively have nuanced the proposition, saying perhaps (as he did) that poets 'are musicians by other means.' Porter also wrote, 'I consider Pope to be the most musical poet in English, though he may not have cared for a note of formal music . . . music teaches us to relate words by their adjacency or their sympathy and not merely by overt meaning. It further reminds us that syntax is the most important element in poetry, the poetical equivalent of harmonic construction.'

There would be plenty of blinking at that last sentence from various schools of poetry – some hedge-schools, some from Harvard Yard – about which Porter was so thoroughly informed: but for my money it is exactly right. The mind is more than intellection but is nothing without it, and so it goes with poetry and syntax, without whose good offices the potential energy can never come to rest. Thinking of Rochester and of Martial, he remarks that 'Classicism means keeping technique in the foreground,' and he had strong allegiances in that direction, whether in the most or the least quippish of his poetry. He was accustomed to say that music was his first love, and as such it had things to show to later loves, including poetry. (One night, in Melbourne, in a small, well-fuelled company, he proclaimed that we should all go down on our knees and thank God for creating Mozart: but the idea did not quite catch on.)

'A man for the littoral': I have tried to suggest a few of the ways in which Porter bore out this wittily-conceived condition or agenda. His transactions with the mind, its words, and the world were versatile, pluriform, and constantly open to revision. In another early poem, 'Walking Home on St Cecilia's Day', unhappiness exacts its tribute, but 'There is a practice of music which befriends/
The ear – useless, impartial as rain on desert – // And conjures the listener for a time to be happy, / Making from this love of limits what he can, / Saddled with Eden's gift, living in the reins / Of music's huge light irresponsibility.' The conjuration went on occurring, and so did its fruits.

I last spoke to Peter Porter, by phone, a couple of weeks before his death. The conversation ended with my being drawn to say, 'You've been a very easy man to love, Peter.' So he was: and so he is.



