I recently finished writing a review for Todd Swift’s Eyewear, a Note about Shyness, Awkwardness and Poetry.

Writing about web page http://toddswift.blogspot.com/2010/06/brigley-on-carcanets-twenty.html

Todd Swift’s blog Eyewear, has just published my review of a new Carcanet anthology, Twenty Contemporary New Zealand Poets. It’s a great anthology and it is good to see New Zealand poetry being taken seriously. The editors, Andrew Johnston and Robyn Marsack, have done an excellent job.

One thing that I particularly liked about the anthology was that each selection of poems by a particular writer was prefaced by a statement of poetics. Reading through these, I was particularly moved by the poet Bill Manhire and his comments about awkwardness, shyness and poetry. Here is what he says:

“Shyness and awkwardness, especially awkwardness, can give a poem peculiar worth – so that the apparently finished thing thrives inside its own sense of incompleteness, keeping faith with the clumsy world it came from. Awkwardness guarantees a kind of authenticity. The stumble, like the presence of bad special effects in a movie, makes us feel human. Whether we’re straight or gay, whatever race, culture or religion we come from, we can all understand the message of desire, longing and grief in Tsvetaeva’s poem. (See the full poem here: http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/zoebriigley/entry/poem_by_marina/).

For those interested in love poetry, I recommend the fabulous anthology, The Virago Book of Love Poetry, edited by Wendy Mulford.

I find this comment heartening, because (believe it or not!) in some ways I am an extremely shy person, but perhaps shyness need not be an obstacle but a help, at least in writing poetry. Shyness or awkwardness makes us more human than slick operators. Perhaps it works too against the kind of celebrity culture that dominates in the media. It reminds me of the singer Madeleine Peyroux who I saw being interviewed once on some BBC talkshow. I had to laugh, because Peyroux hardly spoke; she was altogether shy, awkward, self-conscious and completely refreshing!

I kiss you—across hundreds of separating years.

No one has ever stared more tenderly or more fixedly after you…

No one has ever stared more

Consequently, they’ve asked me to write a column in the newsletter on “Why Poetry Matters”, the title taken from Jay Parini’s excellent book Why Poetry Matters.

—

Last month I talked about poetry and current financial crisis, but what could be further away from money than love? Love poetry has a long history and special significance, because it expresses both universal longings and a specific dedication to a particular person. Perhaps this is what is so wonderful about love poetry – that it represents a meeting of the personal and universal. The grief or longing expressed in love poetry is shared by the poet and the reader.

One of my favourite love poets is the Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva (sometimes spelled Tsvetayeva or Cvetaeva). Tsvetaeva is a somewhat tragic character; she lived through the Russian Revolution, she was exiled from Russia in the 1920s and 30s for her radical politics, and she died by hanging in 1941, an event which some suggest was murder rather than suicide. Apart from her heartbreaking life, Tsvetaeva’s love poems are legendary and they have the universal quality necessary for great love poems.

‘No one has taken away anything’ is a poem about being separated from someone you love, yet Tsvetaeva suggests that however far apart the lovers are, the relationship is still intact – no one can take anything away from them. Tsvetaeva goes on in the poem to express her unworthiness and she sets her lover free:

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it describes, includes them. Other migrants such as Asians and Pacific Islanders ... are still further removed from being represented in the biculural mode. A prescriptive, rather than a descriptive definition, official biculturalism in New Zealand marginalizes the ethnic groups who do not see themselves represented under the umbrella term ‘Pakeha’, while at the same time presupposing a homogenous ‘British’ culture as the binary opposite to Maori. (Nola 2000: 207)

References

April 10, 2010
A Note on Proest.
What is proest?
Proest is a technique used in Welsh poetry. It’s a kind of half-rhyme in which the end consonant is the same, but the vowel is different though of a similar length, for example the English word ‘cap’ makes a proest with the Cymraeg (Welsh) word twwp ( meaning ‘stupid’). I take this example from Mererid Hopwood’s Singing in Chains: Listening to Welsh Verse, in which there is a longer explanation of proest.

(See: Mererid Hopwood, Singing in Chains: Listening to Welsh Verse(Llandysul, Carmarthenshire: Gomer, 2004), 67).

There’s more on this blog about Welsh poetry in the series of entries on “The Measures of Welsh Poetry” http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/zoembrigley/entry/the_measures_of/ .

Babel or Pentecost? Gwyneth Lewis’ Poem ‘Pentecost’.

In interview with Richard Poole, the poet Gwyneth Lewis describes how the poetic traditions of England and Wales have different tendencies depending on the language in which they were written. She compares the traditional metres of English verse with the lyricism and prosody of poetry in Cymraeg and she suggests that transference of traditional poetic techniques from one language to the other can be beneficial, especially when it offers the remedy of Cymraeg’s music for English poetry’s ‘flat-footedness’ (1995a: 28).

In thinking about Lewis’s vision of language, Angharad Price uses the symbolism of the Biblical story of Babel to describe Lewis’ attitude to poetic language. The story of Babel appears in Genesis and it tells how human beings decide to further their power by building a tower that reaches up to God. God destroys the tower and divides the people by instilling different idioms in different groups:

“So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build a city. Therefore the name of it is called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11: 8-9)

Themes of the Babel story, such as linguistic division and nostalgia for a protolanguage, are used by Price to describe Lewis’ practice and she notes how Lewis, “has described the double-edged venture of that other bilingual creature, the translator, who ignores God’s hand in the creation of the Tower of Babel, as one that is conciliatory and blasphemous at the same time” (Price 1999: 51). Price suggests that for Lewis, bilingualism has dictated that she, “view every individual language as a reflection of the Ursprache, the “Holy Writ” of which Walter Benjamin spoke” (49). In this view, Lewis is preoccupied with Ursprache, the German word for a protolanguage from which all other languages have derived. As Walter Benjamin states in his essay, ‘The Task of the Translator’ (to which Price refers), while a translation cannot ‘claim permanence,’ it might direct one to ‘the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages’ (Benjamin 1992: 75-76). Price concludes: “For a Christian poet such as Gwyneth Lewis, the words of any language are paths leading to God’s original Word” (Price 1999: 49).

It is not surprising that the Babel metaphor pervades criticism by Price and others, since in Wales, there do seem to be powerful unwritten rules about what you can or cannot do with language and there is a prevailing desire for linguistic purity. Counterparts in Scotland seem to have embraced deterritorialising techniques, for example Hugh Macdiarmid’s synthetic Scots (or Lallands) that blends and combines different versions of Scottish languages, yet not much experimentation of this nature has been recognised in Wales.The focus is on the purity of language, so that to be a poet in Wales, you must write in English or in Cymraeg but not both. Some writers in Cymraeg have even refused even to be translated. Twm Morys states that when writing in Cymraeg, he is, ‘speaking with Welsh-speaking people’ and he adds: ‘if others would like to join in, well
On one level this story is a pragmatic rendering of the universality in the apostles’ message about Christianity, yet it also celebrates difference of language and culture and allows for each individual to retain that difference. AlChin suggests that Pentecost has more progressive symbolism than Babel because it celebrates a multiplicity of tongues: ‘The unity which the Spirit brings is thus seen as a unity in difference, a unity in freedom, which brings out rather than suppresses the multiplicity, the richness of the universe which God has made’ (1991: 126). AlChin recognises an appreciation of different languages which emerges from, ‘a vision of the world as made by God in diversity as well as unity, from a vision of a qualitative catholicity of life, which respects and does not destroy human differences and variety’ (138). As in the metaphor of Pentecost, Lewis celebrates diversity in languages and being bilingual, she is able to appreciate both their similarities and their differences, because any language is ‘only a servant in the project of praising God’ (1995a: 27).

It is no coincidence that the opening poem of Lewis’s first collection, Parables and Faxes, is entitled ‘Pentecost’ and this poem will be analysed in detail as an example of deterritorialisation. The poem is typically idiosyncratic in its use of language and the deterritorialisation of the English idiom can be seen to full effect. As the title indicates, the subject matter taps into Lewis’s spiritual vision of language.

See the poem here: http://www.slope.org/archive/eight/lewis.html Or you can look it up in Lewis Chaotic Angels (2005a: 10).

The stanza of ‘Pentecost’ uses a sestet with a regular rhyme pattern with rhymes, half rhymes and proest between: lines one and four, lines two and three, and lines five and six. In addition, lines one and four use the same rhyme in each stanza, a technique reminiscent of verse forms like the awdl and cynghanedd, in which main rhyme is repeated throughout the poem.

The traces of these strict verse forms are accompanied by use of proest and cynghanedd and all of these techniques combine to reproduce an important characteristic of Cymraeg poetry described by AlChin: ‘One of the qualities which marks the whole Welsh tradition is a desire for a kind of epigrammatic terseness, a desire to say much in little’ (1991: 143). The desire to express the religious metaphor through a colloquial idiom as a form of exultation has been described by the religious icon, since the painter of an icon, ‘forces his lines to practice a certain self-denial’ in order to convey universal spiritual messages (144). Similarly, Lewis’s use of cynghanedd is not simply a matter of prosody. J.P. Ward is adamant that cynghanedd is not simply, ‘a matter of ornamentation’ but the form demands ‘that the poet emphasize a certain feeling very deeply by making all the words he chooses practice a certain self-denial in reinforcing that feeling’ (1978: 3). For Ward, the effect is that of feeling that ‘the words are forced into position against their will, and this, paradoxically, makes them strain like bent mental, giving them great tension and power’ (3). Similarly, cynghanedd ‘makes each different line or phrase seem to belong to and be contained by some over-all hidden idea binding it’ (3). The reproduction of these techniques not only evokes Welsh terseness in the English idiom, but also displays a larger vision which comments on cathartic acceptance of the gift of languages and the blunting of minor and major idioms.

Nerys Williams notes how the poem, ‘Pentecost’, ‘alerts us immediately to the gift of languages or glossolalia’, which enables the speaker’s safe passage through the checkpoints of Europe to Florida (2003: 25). Ian Gregson suggests that the speaker of this poem is more than one language and indicates ‘a dialogue […] view of experience’ (2007: 65), and he sees this dialogism evoked via the ‘Christian idea of speaking in tongues’ as potentially problematic for Lewis as it represents ‘speakers’ being ‘invaded by alien voices’ (65). A more positive reading of ‘Pentecost’, however, sees the poem as a celebration of travel, communication and exploration. Lewis’s deterritorialisation might then work not only to promote an ethos of catholicity and a celebration of human difference.

The poem begins as a kind of hymn or sermon (‘The Lord wants me to go to Florida[…]’ (Lewis 2005a: 10.11)) and in the spirit of Pentecost is a rhapsody of prosody. This kind of poetry would seem to correspond with a general characteristic of Welsh poetry described by H.I. Bell, as a ‘peculiar sensitiveness to the music of words’ (1936: 5). To Bell, this represents, a ‘love of accomplished and eloquent speech’ and in the case of the peculiar speaking manner of the Welsh preacher (labelled with the Cymraeg word, hwayl (6). The poem is a medley of description of a lyrical scene and the religious, since the metaphor of ‘Lord’ and the first syllable of ‘Florida’ is highlighted as the two stresses resemble a ‘cynghanedd lag or drag Harmony’http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/zeобрегль/entry/ the_measures_of/ where one syllable in the first half of the line chimes with the penultimate syllable. The rigidity of the form is counter-balanced by the ghostly speaker who can slip through borders much as Lewis slips between the conventions of Welsh and English. Lewis’s metaphor of the “mercury thieves” is telling, since it refers to the drifters that invade Florida when the mercury in the thermometer plunges in the northern states of the US.

This visit, however, is not simply an unauthorised plundering of Florida sunshine, but a mission from God revealing Lewis’ spiritual vision of language. The journey to Florida has been foretold recounted not only by ancient prophecies but via the modern fax: a bathetic twist to the religious mystery. The speaker’s guardian angel, too, belongs to a ‘love of accomplished and eloquent speech’ as in the case of the peculiar speaking manner of the Welsh preacher (labelled with the Cymraeg word, hwayl (10.17-18).)

Similarly, Lewis’ use of cynghanedd: with the chinking of the word ‘act’, the second syllable of ‘natural’ and the second syllable of ‘distractions’. There is a kind of uncanniness about the reappearance of familiar sounds that creates a sense of fatefulness, while the adherence to strict rules indicates the poet’s self-denial as described by AlChin and Ward. The expression, ‘to act unnatural’, is characteristic of South Walean dialects when in colloquial practice adverbs are replaced with adjectives. In the spirit of the title, ‘Pentecost’, to act unnaturally might refer to the act of writing in complicated forms and to the kind of linguistic play in which Lewis engages here.

The speaker of ‘Pentecost’ passes ‘unhindered’ through the border thanks to this linguistic play and she describes how her glossolalia, the possibility of speaking spontaneously in an unknown language, is stamped on her passport. What is on the speaker’s tongue though, is not a fiery flame but rather ‘the tang / of travel on the atlas of my tongue’ (2005a: 10.8-9). In this example, ‘tang’ chimes with ‘tongue’, ‘shall’ chimes with the second syllable of ‘travel’, while ‘taste’ and ‘atlas’ echo each other too. One effect of this prosody is to escape into a sound-world, where the sensual experience of language is paramount and where prosody even supersedes the speaker’s persona.

This speaker is only ‘a slip of a girl’, a colloquial expression that indicates frailty, but it is her gift of tongues that translates her into ‘a standing flame’, a servant of God whose subject matter taps into Lewis’ spiritual vision of language:

And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. And when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded because that every man heard them speak in his own language. (The Acts of the Apostles 2.3-6)

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Price is right to note that the English idiom and Cymraeg are intimately connected in Lewis’ writing, yet underlying the Babel symbolism is the assumption that diversity of languages is negative and there is a desire to make languages into the same, to create an omniscient protolanguage or even a mother-tongue. The Babel metaphor does not always carry over as a gift or for the creative chaos of deterritorialisation. In searching for a religious metaphor to express Lewis’s practice, A.M. Allchin contrasts Babel with the spirit of Pentecost. Occurring in the New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles, the Pentecost story tells how the apostles are visited by the Holy Spirit which enables them to speak in new languages:

[The Acts of the Apostles 2.3-6]
emphases on ‘groves,’ ‘graves’ and ‘hives’ signals a movement from fruitfulness to death to a new productivity and this again reflects the spirit of Pentecost, which represents the new age following the resurrection of Christ. The language of the US is celebrated here for its plainness (‘spelt plainly’), its explosive energy (‘hand grenades’) and for what makes it different to the treatise which deals with a particular subject systematically and formally, rather than creatively.

Like her mentor at University of Columbia, Joseph Brodsky, Lewis retains a love for the power of American linguistic experimentation. Lewis describes Brodsky’s feeling of admiration for the throwaway remark, the catch-all in American speech and she suggests that that, ‘he recognised that [popular culture] was where vitality in language is,’ quoting him as saying: ‘What rots is what’s alive’ (Lewis 2005b: 11). In Lewis’ view, Brodsky equates decomposition with linguistic energy and growth and this seems to be the hidden meaning of the equivalent ‘groves,’ ‘graves’ and ‘hives.’ Lewis refers not only to separate languages but also to languages that run into one another, languages that are decomposing and languages that evolve. The gift of tongues as it exists in the US is celebrated and in the final line, God closes the gap between Europe and the US: ‘He shifts his continent; Atlantic closes’ (Lewis 2005a: 10.36-36). It is no surprise that in interview, Lewis is adamant that it was her reading and experience in the US that began encouraging her to write in English, ‘showing me that it was possible to do that’ (2005b: 11).

To conclude, while ‘Pentecost’ praises the experimentation with language that occurs in the US, Lewis performs that very linguistic play using her own experience of Cymraeg to subvert the English idiom. Behind the epigrammatic terseness, the chiming of cymhanged and proest, Lewis is spelling out a serious message about languages and identity. Like the painter of icons who conveys a spiritual truth, Lewis’ poetic mechanics are working in a state of deprecation. The vigour of Cymraeg’s poetic forms recreate a spiritual vision that undermines the notion of major versus minor languages, and instead allows all languages and versions of languages equal importance.

The protolangue of Babyl is a fallacy for Lewis, because the myth of purity is restrictive for the poet. Deterritorialisation is ruled by chaos, deconstruction and the unravelling of ‘proper language.’ This is the gift of glossolalia, because the Pentecost story emerges from a spirit that celebrates diversity and to ignore such a message indicates, according to Allchin, ‘a degree of blindness which is disabling indeed, an unwillingness to recognize the existence of the other and to let him speak in his own terms, which, while it is universal in our fallen humanity, is yet a special affliction of peoples with an imperial past’ (1991: 139). To allow for difference in language or for different versions of languages represents an act that arises above what Alchin calls our ‘fallen humanity’ gesturing towards spiritual states of salvation, mercy and grace.

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March 21, 2010

Changes to GCSE: Students no longer assessed in writing poetry.

Writing poetry has been shown time and time again to have positive effects on the thinking skills and creativity of children and teenagers. Recent changes to the Welsh and English system mean, however, that, in GCSE English, writing poetry has been sidelined and will not be part of students’ assessment.

This is apparently due to changes to assessment parameters made by the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) in the Welsh Assembly Government and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) for England. The changes now mean that it is practically impossible to write poetry for the creative writing task in coursework.

The first problem is that under the new rubric, a limited amount of time is allowed, which makes it tricky for the writing of poetry. At university level, there are sometimes exams in which a poem has to be written in a couple of hours – e.g. The Practice of Poetry module at University of Warwick – but this kind of task does not seem suitable for school students. In general, students need more time to draft their poems and to think through the implications of their chosen forms and lexis. For school students, the writing of poetry needs to be a marathon not a sprint. The parameters then would have to be radically altered for writing poetry to be included.

The other problem is that there is a set length, a couple of thousand words, which obviously does not suit poetry as it is more condensed than prose. Again this could be sidestepped. At university level, where we are teaching modules that include the choice of writing poetry or fiction, we might ask for 100 lines of poetry or a 3000 word story. This would be a simple adjustment to make to the assessment guidelines.

What really strikes me, though, is how easily poetry has been relegated by these assessment guidelines. Of course, there will still be opportunities for students to write creatively elsewhere on the course, but to me, the omission of writing poetry from the assessment has extremely strong symbolic significance. Those teachers who are scared of poetry (they do exist!) will have an excuse now not to include it. Poetry is not thought to be important enough to become an indispensable part of the curriculum. We can only wonder why?

Is it that we are facing the same old snobbery, the belief that only an elite group of privileged students have the ability to write poetry? Having taught Creative Writing at the National Academy of Gifted and Talented Youth and at GOAL, a writing course for underprivileged kids, I know this to be false. What is more, poetry can be a wonderful discovery for less privileged students as a means of expression and a useful way to learn how to write about their lives with power and eloquence.

Or is it simply that the bureaucratic educational bodies have decided that poetry has little worth or usefulness in today’s society? It’s true I suppose that poetry does not always fit easily with mark schemes or pie graphs or utilitarian charts of students’ development, but poetry is and will always be – as an art between language and music – a fundamental way of expressing the soul and a culture, especially in a place like Britain where literature, and poetry especially, have contributed to the construction and critique of the national character.

Overall, I lament the loss of writing poetry at GCSE. Its omission means not only that a generation of new British poets may never begin to write, and not only that the appreciation of poetry developed by writing in the form is diminished. I am especially concerned because this sidelinning of poetry is a worrying sign that the British education system is slowly dismantling the role of poetry in British life and replacing the poetic with ‘clear objectives’ and ‘measurable outcomes’, the myopic bureaucracy that seems to be bight so many British institutions.
Gil Scott-Heron has always been an impassioned and inspiring performer, but I can’t pretend that I have always been completely comfortable with his polemic. When teaching political poetry in a Creative Writing workshop setting, I use his album *Small Talk at 125th and Lennox* to show the power of political writing, but also to highlight the problems in using poetry for moralising or didactic purposes. In this kind of workshop, it is useful to play students ‘The Revolution will not be Televised’... ...and/or ‘Whitey on the Moon’.

In poems like these, Heron uses rhetoric, humour and irony to critique American society, but what is more disturbing is how he uses such techniques in the poem/song ‘The Subject was Faggots’, a diatribe against homosexuals. The homophobic hatred in this poem is shocking and disturbing, and it is very difficult to understand how Scott-Heron becomes so bigoted when he is such a passionate spokesperson for black rights. Thinking about these paradoxes, however, does force students to consider where the line is between political polemic and hate speech. As Tim Dellow explains for *Rock Feedback*:

"Like with Johnny Cash before him, there is a desire to whitewash and sanctify the artist towards latter stage of his career. This is a man made up of many faults."

It was with some trepidation then that I attended a little-publicized “reading” by Gil Scott-Heron at Columbia College, Chicago to celebrate African History Month. The reading, however, turned into a three and a half hour show to a warm audience of Chicagoans, who continually shouted or clapped encouragement.

After a warm-up act by performance poets, Verbatim, Scott-Heron began his set by simply talking, telling stories in a very honest and unaffected way. For example, Scott-Heron told the story of how he was touring with Stevie Wonder in 1980 when the terrible news came that John Lennon had been shot. Wonder decided not to mention Lennon’s death until the end of that night’s show, and Scott-Heron recalled in moving detail how Wonder spoke about his murdered friend. The next day’s newspapers, however, reported that Wonder hadn’t mentioned Lennon’s death. Scott-Heron told us wryly to always stay until the end of the gig.

When Heron did start to play, it was simply him and a piano singing classics like ‘Your Daddy Loves You’, ‘We Almost Lost Detroit’, ‘Pieces of a Man’, ‘Winter in America’ and ‘Or Down you Fall’. Later a pianist, drummer and a harmonica player join him to blast out more upbeat numbers like ‘Three Miles Down’, ‘95 South (All of the Places We’ve Been)’, ‘Work for Peace’, ‘Is That Jazz’, and ‘Celebrate, Celebrate, Celebrate’. The night ended with everyone on their feet, young and old, and it felt more like a gospel church service than a gig. Strangely missing were the diatribes of *Small Talk at 125th and Lennox*, as the more aggressive polemic was replaced by a message of simple survival. Less confident and knowing than it once was, Scott-Heron’s voice sounded all the more sincere when he sang out:

> From the Indians who welcomed the pilgrims  
> And to the buffalo that one ruled the plains  
> Like the vultures circling beneath the dark clouds  
> Looking for the rain

Spanish translation of my poem, ‘Blodeuwedd’

This is a translation into Spanish of a version of my poem, ‘Blodeuwedd’, a poem based on the story of the woman of flowers in the Welsh book of myth, The Mabinogion. It was made quite a few years ago through a project at UEA and the Centre for Translation in Tarazona, Spain. It was done by Eugenia Vasquez and Enrique Alda.
July 06, 2009

Reading for Oxfam

This is quite a good recording of me reading at the Oxfam Marylebone Bookshop. It was quite a hard reading, because the poem (‘The Jewel-box’) is rather emotional and I hadn’t read it before, but it turned out quite well.

The poem is published in the recent issue of The Manhattan Review which features a lot of young British poets [http://www.themanhattanreview.com/archive/13_2.html](http://www.themanhattanreview.com/archive/13_2.html). You can see more of them reading on YouTube.

October 12, 2008

An Appreciation of Charles Bennett’s poem, ’Salthouse’

When we walked up the hill above Salthouse and saw, looking down where we’d been,
ourselves on the beach waving,
we were there and here and no-place,
coming and going at once, perceiving
the speckled clouds as sleeping seals,
as we dipped our toes in the breeze
and watched from the hill's shoreline
a kestrel come in with the tide
and hold his stillness open
over the ship weathervane
of the famous drowned church,
his shadow on the ground below him
the anchor that kept him aloft.

Commentary
I really enjoyed reading this poem by Charles Bennett. It has a quiet beauty about it and a strong sense of awe about nature.

The poem begins in Salthouse, a small village in Norfolk (see http://www.tournorfolk.co.uk/salthouse.html), with the act of climbing a hill with all its symbolism of work, ascension, success. The first couplet lingers on the summit of the hill and then introduces the players, the mysterious "we" who might be companions, lovers or simply fellow travellers. They are caught in the act of looking back before the poem jolts from one couplet to another in a kind of jump-cut.

The description that follows creates a doubleness as the travellers at the summit of the hill also exist in the space of the beach. These others might be the selves left behind in previous times, experiences, eras, but there is a strong sense of multiple identities. This weird warping of time and space is complicated by the gesture of the others on the beach: they wave. A wave is a gesture of recognition, so the others must know and recognise the travellers on the hill. They almost seem to be encouraging the climbers and one might read into this that the others are fathers, mothers or ancestors encouraging the continuation of a lineage. The act of waving is also a friendly gesture and one wonders whether the others on the beach are happier than the travellers who have made the strenuous climb. In this couplet, there is a questioning of identity and a sense of unreality and loss of these other selves that appear like a fleeting apparition.

This feeling continues in the next couplet where there is disorientation as the narrator is literally unsure whether he is "coming or going". The imperceptible becomes the concrete and tangible objects appear in the insubstantial: this is the feeling of the seal/cloud metaphor. It is also significant that the seal is sleeping, as sleep refers to dreaming and also creates a feeling of anticipation and stillness: what will happen when the seal awakes?

It is at this point that a change occurs in the poem and it moves from insubstantiality and lack to sensual experience. The image of dipping a toe in the breeze recalls the anticipatory act of testing sea water before plunging in and the whole poem appears to anticipate the appearance of the kestrel.

When the kestrel does arrive, he travels with a natural flow – the turn of the tide – and in contrast to the climbing of the hill by the human travellers, the kestrel remains motionless and still. The kestrel is remote to the world of human beings; he floats at a distance over human attempts to read the natural world (the weathervane) and the tragedies that they suffer at the hands of nature (the drowned church).

The kestrel does, however, have something in common with the human travellers watching him: a sense of doubleness. Yet even this is different to the human doubling at the beginning of the poem, because rather than being a source of anxiety, the kestrel’s double (its shadow) is an anchor, something that keeps it rooted and safe. The narrator in the end seems to admire the kestrel’s lack of self-consciousness, a fault that is so endemic to human beings. Like Rilke and others, Bennett admires the kestrel’s ability to be at one with itself, a characteristic that takes it far higher than the hill summit climbed by earth-bound humans.

The Midnight Heart
“Zona de plagas donde la dormida come / lentamente / su corazón de medianoche” – Alejandra Pizarnik

Night ramblings of insomnia, and day ramblings for the sleep deprived.
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Galleries

- Slideshow of all galleries
- 1940s and 1950s (10 images)
- Architecture (12 images)
- Art (66 images)
- Mexico and Belize (49 images)
- My Readings, Articles, Books (15 images)
- New York (19 images)
- Other America (83 images)
- Other European Cities (16 images)
- Pennsylvania (16 images)
- Spaces (3 images)
- Spain and Portugal (34 images)
- Things (6 images)
- Wales (54 images)
- Writers (15 images)

Goodreads

my read shelf:

Goodreads Quotations

Zoe’s favorite quotes

“Intellect does not attain its full force unless it attacks power.” — Germaine de Staël

Red Room

My Writing Online

- Two Poems After Anne Bronte
- Four Poems on Horizon
- Essay on Pascale Petit and Frida Kahlo
- Poems in Frontiers
- The Flying Bed and Other Poems
- Poems on Limelight
- Reading ‘The Jewel-box’ for Oxfam Poetry Readings, London

The Secret

-
Comment Policy

Feel free to leave a comment on this blog, but I want to let readers know that I only accept comments that are linked to a valid homepage, e-mail or blog. I don’t accept anonymous comments. If a conversation is going to work, I want to know who it is that I’m talking to. If you really have a good reason for remaining anonymous, drop me a line instead by e-mail.

Most recent comments

Yes, you’re right it does make you think and I know what he means. I also like the fact that it’s su… by Sue on this entry
True, I hope so too, but it makes you think! by on this entry
He takes a very pessimistic view of things. I think the human spirit will prevail. I don’t see the p… by Sue on this entry
Hi Zoe, do you know the glass dresses made by the artist Diana Dias Leao? They’re not meant to be wo… by redbotinki on this entry
We're having some technical issues with this blog post, so please bear with me! by on this entry

Favourite blogs

My favourites

Charlotte's Research blog
David Morley
David Morley: Teaching Blog
George Ttoouli, Warwick Writing Programme
Jane Holland's Warwick Blog
The Bardathon
The Shakespeare apocrypha
Vag·a·bond
Alison Bechdel
Barbara Dordi
Baroque in Hackney
Bitch
How employable are today's graduates?

“Anonymous” Discussion

Dating the Birth of Jesus and the 'first Christmas' with a Herodian Coin

Professor Donald Singer and Dr Michael Hulse discuss this year's Hippocrates Prize

Latest news about poem on anews.com. Be in touch with news about poem! poem. La Migra. The grownups sat on their long chair called couch And talked of the weather, the dew of the blossoms's morning, And what might happen to us, the children. Mom said don't leave the house, not without. 06.12. Jim Acosta: Let's face it, Stephen Miller couldn't take the kind of heat I was throwing yesterday. Wut. The post Jim Acosta: Let's face it, Stephen Miller couldn't take the kind of heat I was throwing yesterday appeared first on Hot Air. 08.03. Charles.Lee.Poetry. Blocked Unblock Follow Following Never miss a story from Charles.Lee.Poetry., when you sign up for Medium. Learn more. Never miss a story from Charles.Lee.Poetry.