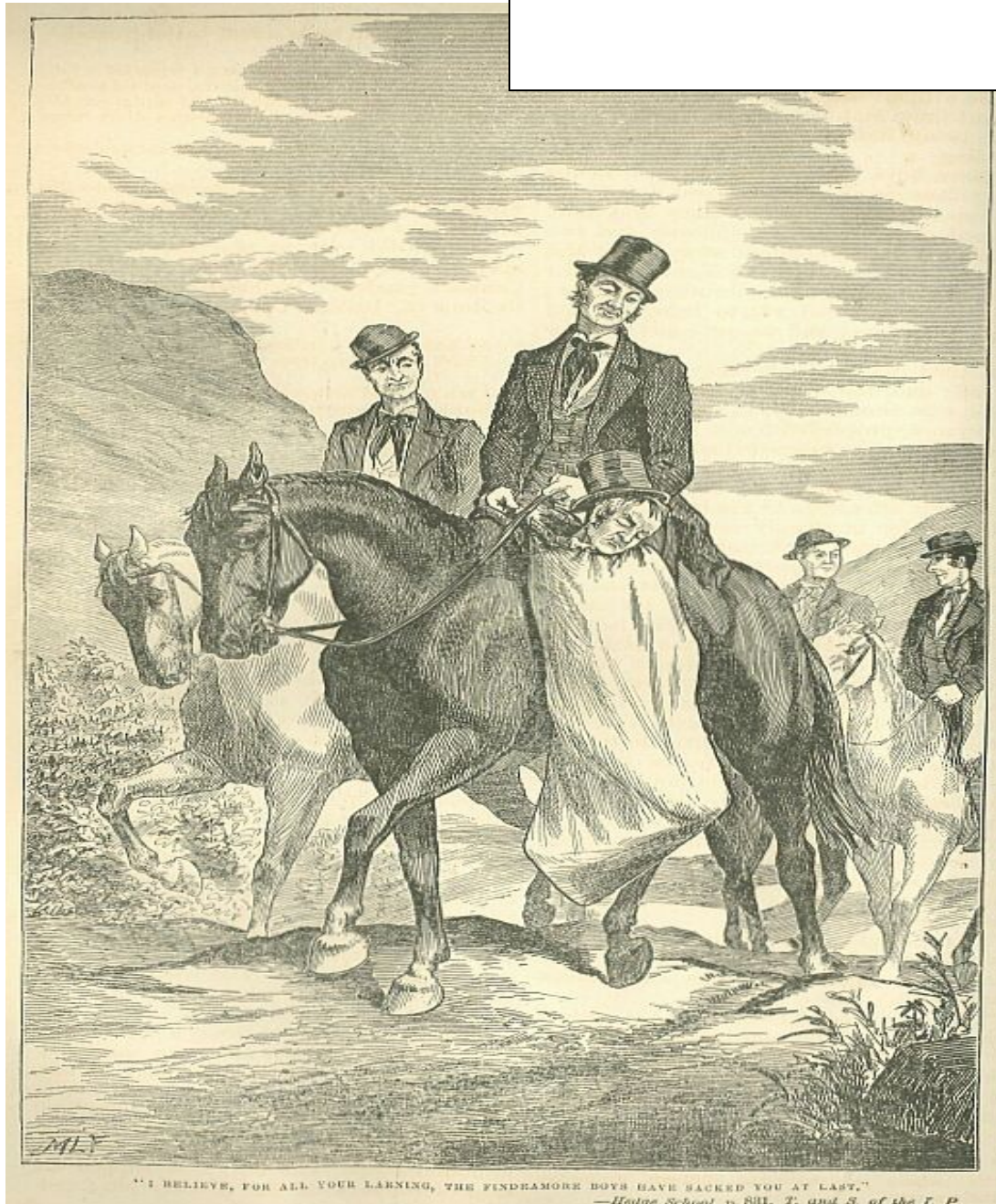


POST

A REVIEW OF POETRY STUDIES



post ii: poetry & education

POST II

edited by Kit Fryatt

POST is the peer-reviewed e-journal of The Irish Centre for Poetry Studies at the Mater Dei Institute. Issues will be edited alternately by Michael Hinds and Kit Fryatt of the Centre, and will appear on at least a yearly basis. They can be contacted by email at (michael.hinds@materdei.dcu.ie or kit.fryatt@materdei.dcu.ie).

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Contents

Editorial: Beyond Book-learning ... 4

Kit Fryatt

Call for Papers – Post III ... 7

What the Poem Wants ... 8

Michael Dennis Browne

“The School in Which We Learn”: Delmore Schwartz and Education ... 20

Alex Runchman

Reading Between the Lines in Philip Larkin’s “Naturally the Foundation Will Bear your Expenses”... 32

John Scattergood

Poems: “A History of Naming” and “A Prayer for Prometheus”... 42

Sean M. Conrey

Poem: “the prevarication of flowers”... 44

Dylan Harris

Review-Essay: “The Absolute Dust of the Language”: Reading George Szirtes ...45

Philip Coleman

Review-Essay: “Technically Speaking”: *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings* ... 50

Marthine Satris

Reviews ... 54

Notes on Contributors ... 62

editorial: beyond book-learning

Two anecdotes to begin: one from the day job and one from my extracurricular life. A couple of years ago, I was returning essays to students, one of whom, though able in drama and fiction studies, struggled to write well about poetry. Frustrated to receive a mark which lowered her average, she tried to explain what she found so difficult about reading and analysing poems: “Till I started this course, I had no idea that poetry was so *premeditated!*” It was a good word for an artform that seems to me among the most likely to make victims of its readers – only music, perhaps, is more icily amoral.

Last month I was hosting a poetry performance in a café on the ground floor of a building containing musicians’ rehearsal studios. A band – men and women, but all androgynously reminiscent of Bob Dylan *circa* 1965 – strolled downstairs in search of coffee. Their studied coolth proved surprisingly vulnerable to the sight and sound of people saying verse, and after a few moments of behaviour which Patrick Kavanagh might have identified as that of “a rat near strange bread”, they scuttled back to their studio without a ristretto between them. Later, I wondered aloud why this might be, to receive an immediate answer from a regular member of the audience: “You know why. Because of the *horrible* way poetry is taught in schools.” He didn’t (I think) mean to be unkind, but he knew what I do for a living; his words weren’t without reproof.

Both anecdotes illustrate attitudes to poetry and education which are contradictory yet complementary – a negative version of negative capability, if you like. My student held a notion of the poet as artless, harmless “fancies childe”, and was startled to recognise the crafting and craftiness which poetry enables and requires. My interlocutor, identifying teaching methods *horrible* enough that their mere memory could unsettle self-possessed young people who make or at least hope to make their living in a lyric medium barely dissimilar, clearly had in mind the reverse of fancy: rigid formulae, ill-defined yet dogmatic use of technical terminology, poems taught as cipher to which the teacher or textbook holds the legend.

Poetry and education have been linked since antiquity, since – what seems more archaic still – the individual antiquities of our own childhoods. The mnemonic properties of verse and song attend early encounters with literacy:

abcdefg
hijklmnop
qrstuv
wxyz
Now I know my abc,
Next time sing along with me.

But most of us have verse in our lives long before we know the ABC. In his talk “What the Poem Wants”, delivered as the keynote address at the conference *Poetry and Education*, held at Mater Dei Institute of Education in February 2008, Michael Dennis Browne draws attention to the high quality of verse encountered in pre-literacy. He quotes Donald Hall: “Mother Goose is a better poet than W.H. Auden” – indubitable, and we might add Yeats’s thought: “You can refute Hegel, but not the Song of Sixpence.” Browne’s talk is a powerful articulation of the irrefutability of poetry. In his emphasis on the desiring, questing, autonomous poem, he also suggests, albeit in the most humane of ways, the uncanny aspect

of verse, the way it works through us, making us its objects, and if we are foolish or susceptible enough, its patsies.

Browne, now professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota, reflects on poetry after a working lifetime spent teaching and writing it. Alex Runchman, a writer at the other end of his critical career, explores the engagement of Delmore Schwartz – “precocious student”, perplexed, committed teacher – with education. If people know anything about Schwartz it tends to be the identity of his most famous graduate student, Lou Reed – Runchman makes a timely and vital case for regarding him as an epicurean, a taxonomist of knowledge and a commentator on ethnicity rather than a footnote to the history of the Velvet Underground.

Another veteran scholar, John Scattergood, deconstructs a much misread and often disregarded poem. The topicalities of Philip Larkin’s “Naturally the Foundation Will Bear your Expenses” have dated deliciously: “The Third” and “Morgan Forster” savour for this reader of a half-glamorous, half-naïf world of crimplene suits, public telephones with buttons A and B and competitive chain-smoking on television interviews. But, as Scattergood makes clear, this poem raises questions which, as old as the art itself, are still burning currency: how do we distinguish between poet and speaker? How does a poem relate to the poetry of the past? Can we trust those shady, mendacious characters we call poets? Perhaps less a reflection on poetry and pedagogy than a practical illustration of how an experienced teacher approaches a poem, this article demands that we attend to the text itself, rather than the mischievous and misleading personality that Larkin adopted in interview and commentary, in order to propose some provisional answers to those questions.

POST is primarily a journal of criticism and review, and does not accept poetry submissions, but it seemed apt in this issue to publish some poems which themselves meditate on the process of learning. Sean M. Conrey participated in the conference mentioned above, offering a paper drawn from his experience of teaching creative writing. Here we see a sample of his poetic work, “A History of Naming”, reprinted from his recent chapbook *A Conversation with the Living* (2009) and the previously unpublished “A Prayer for Prometheus”. Conrey’s poems are documents of sentimental, as well as academic education, attentive alike to their environment and to the sacramental qualities of lyric. Dylan Harris’s “the prevarication of flowers” is an oblique, yet playful description of the development of an aesthetic, even perhaps synaesthetic, response to the world: his fragmented syntax allows us to perceive, as if at the edge of our fields of vision, “close scent of delicious shape”. Harris’s first collection *antwerp* (2009) is reviewed with the verbal energy it deserves by Dave Lordan, alongside Giles Goodland’s fifth book of poems, *What the Things Sang* (2009), in this issue of POST.

Two review-essays, by Philip Coleman and Marthine Satris, explore recent publications by poets who, in very different ways, have broached and provoked questions of didacticism in their poetry and criticism. Coleman, a scholar with a familial as well as a professional interest in Hungarian culture, proposes that the internationally-minded work of George Szirtes can lead us beyond the borders of book-learning altogether, and what reader, even one with Coleman’s range of interest and expertise, has not occasionally wanted to explore that territory? Satris takes on the sometimes forbidding presence of Geoffrey Hill with a robust sense of the critic’s duty to delight and inform readers and students. Meanwhile, among the shorter notices, Richard Hayes and Dave Lordan consider some recent

poetry publications, and Michael Hinds offers a lyrical (and brief) assessment of an epic study of Epic.

I should like to be able to pretend that the coincidence of this education-themed issue with the announcement of a new MA in Poetry Studies, to be offered at Mater Dei Institute of Education from the beginning of the academic year 2010, is not fortuitous. (POST's discerning and alert readership, however, may recall the confident announcement at the end of the last issue, promising POST II before Christmas 2009. Many thanks are due to contributors and readers alike for their patience with a slow-coach novice editor.) The MA in Poetry Studies represents an institutional precedent – it is the first degree offered by Mater Dei without a formal theological or religious studies component. Poetry – devotional, litanizing, theatrical, numinous, sacramental, sectarian – is, however, only arguably a secular activity, as our colleagues in theology and religious education have been quick to point out.

More notably still, this course of study is a first for the island of Ireland, and indeed this western European archipelago – the only comparable programme in Europe is offered by our partners in Portugal at the University of Coimbra. We hope that this link, already established by staff exchanges, will encourage many future MA students to visit Coimbra, especially to experience their internationally-celebrated Meeting of Poets, which takes place biennially. Our MA in Poetry Studies differs both from higher degrees in various aspects of literature, and from Creative Writing programmes, though we share a constituency of interest and paths of communication with both. It aims to foster and support *poetry critics*, who may also be academic scholars and poets, but equally well may not be, in developing and extending *poetry criticism*.

There is no faster way to clear a room – not even by proposing or opposing the essential Irishness of poets born or resident in this island – than to offer reflections on *poetry in the academy*, and I have no ambition to evacuate the virtual salon or seminar room that is POST with such. It is often noted with disapproval that it is possible to leave some third-level institutions in Britain and Ireland with a degree in English literature without having studied a single poem. I must confess that I cannot always greet the remark with the requisite dismay, for the absence of poetry on curricula perhaps prompts students to make acquaintance with verse in their non-academic lives, as much as it dissuades altogether. But if poetry is on the retreat in the academy, the need for poets and critics to use poetry to reflect upon philosophy, socio-politics and culture is the more urgent. Offering modules in “Poethics: Poetry, Politics and the Civic Space”, “Poetic Geographies” and within the interdisciplinary frame of the “Holocaust and Modern Culture”, as well as courses focussing on close reading skills, contemporary poetic movements, and lyric expression in poetry and song, the MA in Poetry Studies aims to equip students from a variety of backgrounds to exercise poetry's public mandate. Applications for the programme will be accepted until 1st September 2010: contact michael.hinds@materdei.dcu.ie, kit.fryatt@materdei.dcu.ie or paul.hegarty@materdei.dcu.ie for further information.

Thanks as ever are due to the Mater Dei Research Committee for its support of the Irish Centre for Poetry Studies, and to you, our readers, for attending to *POST II: Poetry and Education*. *POST III: Poetry at the Games*, will be published in 2011, edited by Michael Hinds: a call for papers appears below.

KIT FRYATT



CALL FOR PAPERS FOR POST III

Issue III of *POST: a review of poetry studies*, a new online journal of poetry and poetics, will appear in spring/summer 2011. It will be edited by Michael Hinds from The Irish Centre for Poetry Studies at the Mater Dei Institute, Dublin. *POST* is primarily a forum for criticism and theory in the area of poetry and poetics, but welcomes contributions from across disciplines. We publish a small number of reviews of critical works and occasional poems, but do not accept unsolicited poetry submissions.

Terrace chants, race-calls and commentaries, Odes to Gladiators. The poem or song-text read as a game, as a gamble, as a motivational tactic, as a call-to-arms, as a competitive slander, as a threat. As freeplay, foreplay or replay. Contributions are invited of up to c.6000 words on subjects related to this theme. Obvious aspects that may be of relevance are: sports poetry (both found and composed), the poetry of victory and loss, poetry and play, gender, poetry and the hunt, heroic narrative, nationality and identity, translation, visual and concrete poetry, poetry in virtual environments, terrace chanting, playground rites, bingo calling. Contests, prizes, cheating. Warfare, phoney and otherwise. The pyrrhic, the bathetic. Pros, ams, Corinthians, Spartans, Amazons, Afghan horsemen, ice-skaters, steroid abusers, men-women, women-men, flies to wanton boys. As usual, anything really, from the announcing of the FA Cup draw to Louis MacNeice's obscene little parlour ditties or Eliot's game of chess. The issue will also feature other materials, so if there are examples of found texts (whether video or audio) that you would like included, please send them in for consideration.

Please send an abstract of around 300 words outlining your proposed article to michael.hinds@materdei.dcu.ie by September 31st 2010. Articles will be available in PDF for printing purposes as well as appearing in web format, and relevant images or video may be incorporated in articles for the web version. Finished articles are due by March 1st 2011 and should be submitted as an attachment in microsoft Word. Consult the POST stylesheet for more details at (<http://irishcentreforpoetrystudies.materdei.ie/pages/post-a-review-of-poetry-studies/post-stylesheet.php>)

michael dennis browne

This is the text of a talk given at Mater Dei Institute of Education on 22nd February 2008.

what the poem wants

I am a feather on the bright sky
I am the blue horse that runs on the plain

[...]

I stand in good relation to all that is beautiful
I stand in good relation to the daughter of Tsen-tainte
You see, I am alive, I am alive

The poem we just said together was “The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee” by N. Scott Momaday. Ezra Pound says that “Literature is news that stays news.” I could hear those lines, those images, every day of my life, and receive something from them. And I enjoyed the choral sound of your voices.

The poem wants you **intuitive**.

I like what Thoreau says: “The learning of a whole academy will not fashion one good line.” If I think to myself, “Well, let’s see, I’ve been teaching poetry for a long time, I know a lot of poems, I know a lot about poetry, I’m a professor, I’m quite smart, let’s see now, a poem; yes, this should be pretty good” – if that’s my starting point, I’m in trouble. (I’m too conscious – and much too solemn, self-serious.)

I like what Carl Jung says: no one ever sat down and said, “Now, I will make up a symbol.” As the ground puts forth its flowers, he says, so the psyche puts forth its symbols. One of my favourite stories about the writing of a poem comes from A.E. Housman, not only a poet with a great ear but also the greatest classical scholar and translator of his time, who, for the writing of a particular poem, he tells us, relied on what he called an involuntary process, a slightly woozy walk on Hampstead Heath after lunch to get it going – afternoons being, as he confesses, the least intellectual portion of his life. Two stanzas floated in during the walk – bubbling up from his stomach, he tells us. Maybe the third stanza came “with a little coaxing after tea,” but the fourth one did not come: “I had to turn to and compose it myself,” he says, “and that was a laborious business. I wrote it thirteen times and it was more than a twelvemonth before I got it right.” This frank account doesn’t disregard the intellect; it simply puts it in its place in the process.

But my favourite description of how the imagination works comes from Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish film director, who once said this: “I throw a spear into the darkness; that is intuition. Then I must send an army to try to locate the spear; that’s intellect.” What do you think? I think it’s wonderful. I like the idea of the physicality of the throwing, the motion almost for its own sake. It’s a little different from Coleridge’s idea of “a more than usual state of excitement together with more a more than usual state of order,” which is a simultaneous polarity, or Novalis’ notion that “art is chaos shimmering behind a veil of order,” which is magnificently evocative, but Bergman’s formulation has you primarily active, even

wild, flinging your spears, not at all sure of where they are going, and only later sending the intellect to try to find them.

After this playfulness typically follows what I call a vision of order, in which you begin to make some decisions about what you think you want in the poem, a process in which memory has a large role, in which your love of poetry and many other kinds of structures, your sense of craft, your powers of shaping, all have a large part to play – and I will soon be talking about these things. But I like the initiating (procreative) wildness. I like to be wild as long as I need to be (and that stage may last weeks, months, or years). The day I lose my capacity for wildness, whatever my age as an artist, I'm also in trouble. "The only beautiful things," says Andre Gide, "are those that madness dictates and reason writes." Writing, I tell my students, should be daring. Lord, let me not lose my wildness.

If the poem wants you intuitive, then it wants you improvising. "Improvise" breaks down into "im-pro-visore," which means "not foreseen." I love the poetry of D.H. Lawrence, and Alfred Alvarez describes Lawrence's poems as "improvisations at the full pitch of his intelligence." I think that's hugely helpful and accurate. When you're inspired – not a word we toss around too much these days – when you're being breathed into, it means that at the time, as Auden says, you don't quite know what you're doing. You don't have to, you don't have to be in full control: you are being intuitive, hurling spears. You probably won't find most of them later. That's what notebooks are for. Behind any book I publish are dozens of notebooks filled with unfound spears.

Gertrude Stein says that a main thing she learned from William James at Harvard was to "exclude nothing." I see the early drafts of a poem as an open audition in the imagination, where any idea or image, whether or not it can hold a tune, feels free to stand up there on the blank page, gesturing, to try out to be in the production. Keats has a famous formulation, which sees the poet as "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any irritable reading after fact and reason." You need to be able to be in that condition as long as necessary, with a high tolerance for ambiguity and messiness, with no rush for closure. I like what Goethe tells us: "Do not hurry, do not rest."

For myself, I have written so many bad pages on my way to what I hope are some good poems. If ever you went into my papers in the archives at the University of Minnesota, where they are gradually being stored, boxes upon boxes, you would find many improvisations, many stops-and-starts, experiments which went nowhere; lots of dead ends. I like what Marvin Bell says: "The business of being a writer is being less and less embarrassed about more and more." (Rather than the other way round.)

Another thing I tell my students: I don't mind being wrong. I mean this about what I say in the classroom as well as what I put onto the page in draft after draft. In class, sometimes, when the disagreement is strong – even, on occasion, heated – I suggest we take the argument out into the parking lot, storm out and settle the issue right then, once and for all. That has yet to happen, I should say, but I like the empty threat: "Out in the parking lot." It defuses tensions. In many situations concerning the imagination, we need to get beyond the duality of right or wrong.

Most questions concerning poetry are, finally, to be lived, as Rilke says in his *Letters to a Young Poet*. If you were given the answer, Rilke suggests, you couldn't handle it. And if there *are* answers, which sometimes there may be, so many of them are in the nature of "both...and" rather than "either...or," which is another duality to get beyond. You can encounter in the teaching of poetry, as well

as in certain areas of politics, or religion, what I call horrendous certainty. Roland Barthes warns us, by way of the example of Orpheus, not to turn to look at the question we are leading out of the dark toward the light of a meaning; all you end up with, he says, if you turn and look, is “a named meaning, which is a dead meaning.” By such turning and looking, Orpheus once again lost his love to the darkness.

I want to go back to intuitiveness. Back to Jung’s idea of the conscious intention to “make up a symbol.” Working in the schools, as I have done many times over the years, as well as teach undergraduate and graduate classes, I have done all kinds of writing exercises with students of all ages, and some of them are quite silly at their point of departure: it’s what I call “playing in a serious zone.” Any of the issues that a student’s poems come to deal with, begin to be able to deal with, can be, often are, deeply serious. But the conscious approach does not work, at least for me; I have better luck with the playful, the indirect. At the start, the compass needle can be pointing in a direction opposite to the one in which the poem will eventually go. Sometimes it’s as if the beginning poet stands with arms outstretched and intones: “O great theme, come into my poem!” Well, that’s not how you make symbols either.

Here’s what I might do with my students – and I always do it myself, write with them, and read what I have written – start us on some little rhythmical repetitive task, maybe based on a refrain in a poem by Nadia Tueni or Tadeusz Rozewicz or Scott Momaday (our opening poem, which repeats the phrase “I am”), and as we work with the repetition, in almost a mantra-like way, it’s just possible that, on occasion, a theme of some size, way down in the unconscious of the writer, may begin to rise up a little to see what is happening on the surface, lured there by the playfulness. Lures, in poetry as in fishing, tend to be colourful.

The poem should irrigate, not flood, the reader. That channelling takes craft, takes control, a steady hand. If you just dump a large quantity of water onto desperately dry ground, it will leach away fast. But you need something to pour down those channels, you need something whose nature is flowing, and you need to keep it coming in measures of your choice.

I’m talking analogically about water. Fire is a famous analogy for what takes place inside the imagination, and stealing fire from the gods is, of course, an ancient trope, if not one we favour much now. I’ve been teaching poetry for somewhat over four decades, writing it for more than five, and I still seek fire, in myself and in others. I want the sparks to be running through the world. I like a good blaze of language. And I like what Robert Penn Warren said quite some years ago about the contemporary scene in poetry: “There’s a lot of talent around, but not much fire.”

Everyone, I believe, can do these little initiating tasks, these repetitions I just spoke of. The poem wants you **playful**, so that you can go into surprising or even frivolous places without the embarrassment Marvin Bell speaks of. Good writing, I tell my students, comes, at least in part, from confidence in your subject matter; whatever it will take to get you down into the archives of memory and imagination, it’s my experience that something may be dislodged at the time which, even much later, with labour and craft on your part, can begin to bear fruit as imaginative expression. Down there in the unconscious are things that you alone know, many of which you have forgotten or repressed; down there you become acquainted, or reacquainted, with the largeness, the scope, the strangeness of those contents – and it’s often like actual dreams, with their

extreme wildness and vivid indirectness of meaning, their sometimes savage parades, as Rimbaud called them.

I often think of Hamlet, and what he says to the Player King: "Can you play the murder of Gonzago?" / "Aye, my Lord." Dreams are like players that come to the midnight castle of the mind, and their performance there, an autonomous, intuitive process, can dramatically unlock things that the conscious mind is unaware of, or is threatened by and has discarded or disowned. Poems need such dramas to be displayed for the reader by day, on the page, and I believe an artist's daily practice, in any medium, develops the capacity to hear little suggestions from within and from without, more often murmured than shouted, which have the potential to lead us somewhere we have been needing to go and not been aware of it.

You may overhear or mishear a conversation on a bus; the smell of coffee can suddenly bring back memories of a lost time; you stumble as you step into the street and up comes an image from a urgent but forgotten dream; or, as you are crossing the street, someone hurries by who reminds you of your mother, a woman dining alone at a restaurant (seen over your companion's shoulder) reminds you of your much-mourned sister; you hear an old song or hymn on the radio, one not heard since childhood. Here, in Dublin, I think of the ending of Patrick Kavanagh's lovely poem in which an old man on the street seems to be saying to the poet, "I was once your father."

You must be open to it all, watching, listening, alert to what is in front of you, around you and within you, and constantly, as Eliot says, "amalgamating disparate experiences." Hard to imagine an animal in a forest who is not alert. Are we not in a forest? (A forest of symbols, Baudelaire would say.) And what kind of animal are we? Are we animal-like enough? And where is our intuitiveness in all this?

I've said that the poem wants you playful. It also requires you to work, and I'll run those two together, as I do sometimes in a workshop called "The Work and Play of the Poem." A poem can be a lot of work, a lot of practice, an extraordinary amount, and all that layering, all that trial and error, is hidden from everyone except the one who is doing it. I like Maurice Ravel's account of writing the slow movement of the G major piano concerto: "That flowing phrase! How I worked over it bar by bar! It nearly killed me!"

How often we must often "labour to be beautiful," as Yeats has it, but the work is essentially hidden, as is the playfulness. My old friend Chester Anderson, of blessed memory, a scholar of Irish literature, most especially Joyce but also Yeats, said to me once that when you look at the early drafts of some ultimately great poems by Yeats, you can see that a schoolboy could have written better at that stage, but Yeats knew that whatever was ultimately to come would come only if he allowed himself to put onto the page, in those first stages, whatever occurred to him, which later, over a long process of time, he would sift and sort. That's it, I think: you write down what occurs to you; you live with it. Anxiety for closure can almost always hurt you.

Theodore Roethke, the American poet, a favourite of mine, himself also a great lover (and sometime imitator) of Yeats, says that when you go dredging in the river, you're sure to bring up a lot of bad stuff. The unconscious is a messy place, is it not? But it's where the flowers have their roots. It is the ground of imaginative being.

Play is said to be the child's response to the world. When someone asked me once what I remembered most about my father, who died at 61 when I was

19, I said, “He was playful.” My English-born father Eddie, son of a Donegal father, played the organ (also the piano, also he sang, also painted watercolours). He remains for me, almost forty-eight years after his death, a model of how to be, both by play and by work, in the world.

One plays the flute, the fish, the field; why not the poem? And it was Nietzsche, I believe, who says: “I would only believe in a god who knows how to dance.” Verse, *versus*, involves turns, such as the *volta* in a Petrarchan sonnet, such as the way the line itself turns; poetry has its origins in dance, sacred dance, began with movement, began with improvisation. In the conceiving and shaping of poems, they should not be stolid, these dancers of ours. Play is of their essence. They should be in motion.

The keyboard is one analogy I find myself using in the teaching of the writing of poetry: how many notes are there on your keyboard, I might ask a student, at any level of experience, and how many of them do you think you are using? I also think of the organ, and the complex combinations of stops which are possible. There are other well-known analogies – the juggler (how many apples or oranges can you keep going in the air?), or the team of horses (how many can you add to help you haul the load?) – but I find the keyboard to be the most evocative. And how many fingers are you using, I might go on to ask my student, to sound the notes in the area of the keyboard you are presently working in?

All this is presented unseverely, I should say, even playfully: every student, at any level of experience, should be given room to move, space to feel both safe and excited in. It is my job to stir up possibilities for them.

If you truly improvise, if you enter into what is not foreseen, then the situation is unprecedented, and so are its expressive possibilities (hard to stay away from *that* word). You don’t know what you’re getting into; you don’t want to know. “If I can think of it,” goes a line in a poem by Randall Jarrell, “it’s not what I want.” Here’s a line from Theodore Roethke: “I learn by going where I have to go.” And Gary Snyder quotes a painter who says “I paint what I don’t know” – meaning that rather than something s/he, or the viewer, already knows.

These matters are complex, of course, and I should say that much of what we hold in our archives, and that comes forward in playfulness, has to do with memory – we feed from those deep springs. Not for nothing is Mnemosyne, Goddess of Memory, mother of the nine muses of poetry. But essentially we must – to borrow from Pound and his modernist call – “Make it new.” And that requires intuitiveness, playfulness.

Let’s go back to work (if we must). Sometimes you have to wrestle the poem, all night long, for weeks or months of nights. You have to persist, as Jacob did with the angel, even though the stranger wounded him. And what did Jacob say to the mysterious entity? “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The German poet Rilke, in his poem “The Man Watching” (“Die Schauende”) says that in the struggle with the angel, suppose we won? That victory would make us smaller: you *want* to be defeated, he says, “decisively, by greater and greater beings.” (The translation is by Robert Bly.)

There are many great poems in the language – need I tell this assembly? What a feast of reciting we could have! But there’s no such thing as a total victory: the poem, as Valery famously says, is never finished, only abandoned. I have always liked descriptions of incompleteness, of what we can’t get our little language hands on. “Whatever we know of the world, there is always more,” says a philosopher whose name I cannot remember. Adrienne Rich, in an interview, calls for larger poems: “Experience is larger than language,” she says.

So we will never be done; we will never *get there*. But we “travel hopefully,” we work and play at our poems, which use language, language, language, language, language, because the joys of the labour are intrinsic, and revelled in with the sweat and the frustration. There’s a Buddhist saying: “You are entitled to the work but not the reward.” That’s a hard truth and, I think, a good one: the main reward is in the work itself, the privilege of being able to undertake the poem with all its demands, all the exertion and playfulness it requires. Fame and reputation will have to take care of themselves: we must exult in secret, as Yeats says—the most difficult thing, sometimes—for love of the labour itself.

For myself, I have written so many things people will never read (and published some I wish they had not). I have written a novel for children, for example, a task from which I learned so much, written it sixteen times, and it’s likely that no one will ever read it. Well, OK. (That’s what Ernesto Cardenal writes in his elegy for Thomas Merton, how he reacted when he learned of the death, in Cambodia, of his mentor: “I just said, OK.” Cardenal’s poem, I should add, does go on for many pages after that.) But what an involving joy it was for me, that extended story for children, what a playground it was, how much I learned from that wrestling, that why-notting, how many more notes on the keyboard I feel I was able to reach and sound by way of it.

No energy is wasted if it is given right. Years ago, I made some visits to Tom McGrath in the hospital in Minneapolis; Tom was a North Dakota-born poet who moved to Minnesota to live, eventually became ill there, and finally died there. Among his best-known works is the book-length long poem *Letters to an Imaginary Friend*. The writing of poems was, at that late stage, beyond him, but I said to myself, as I sat there beside the very sick poet: the energy has been given; it is recorded somewhere in the universe. So if the poem wants to work, as well as play, then lucky us, I say, to have the sinew and skill to do it for as long as we can. Let us seize the day (and the night). There is no “poor me” in all this, when we fail, which is likely to be often. Well, let’s be honest here, there can be, in weaker moments, which we all have; I’m sure we could all cry on one another’s shoulders. But that is not the road we are on tonight. Eavan Boland has written brilliantly on the necessity of the experience of failure in a writer’s life.

The poem wants you **empty**. And there may be times when the opposite is true, when it wants you full at the start, even crammed, brimming, swarming, because all useful statements and formulations about the imagination that I know of involve paradox and contradictions. They accommodate complexity. I like what William Blake says: “Without contraries is no progression.” And Niels Bohr, the Danish physicist, says this: “The opposite of a fact is a falsehood, and the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.” Another nail in the coffin, perhaps, of horrendous certainty.

To me, emptiness suggests something relaxed rather than something contracted or crouched over. I think of Housman’s stroll on the heath; he was filled with a nice slice of pie, perhaps, but his mind was open to whatever might choose to enter. And I associate emptiness with spaciousness. James Wright, at a symposium on Chinese poetry, said he admired that poetry for its spaciousness, its sense of what he called its “endless abundance.” He felt welcome in the poems.

This story may be too well-known for me to tell, but here it briefly is: the renowned Western professor of philosophy who travels east, into the mountains, to meet a famous guru, and at that meeting, the professor talks and talks, asks and asks, interrogates and interrogates. When tea is served, the guru himself

pours for the chattering professor, pours and pours until tea spills over the rim of the cup, onto the floor, and even down the steps of the room in which they are meeting. The message seems clear: what is already filled has no room in it. If you are to give, first you must be able to receive.

Once, when I was teaching a workshop on poetry and dreams, one of the writers asked: “How do we go deeper?” A huge question, of course, and my quick response was: “Practice emptying.” A great deal of the spiritual writing I value also talks about emptying – about *kenosis*, about *sunyata*, “form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” sometimes very challenging notions that takes us out beyond our conceptual vocabulary. In an oratorio I recently wrote with the composer Stephen Paulus, which has to do with, among other things, anti-Semitism and Christian implication in the Shoah, the Holocaust, the first line the chorus sings is this: “Create in me a great emptiness.” Emptying seems a pre-requisite, somehow, for exploration, whether poetic or spiritual.

Here’s a simple image of my own: sometimes your initial mental landscape, the condition of mind, heart or spirit from which you start, is filled with bristling buildings, like the skyline of a typical contemporary city; this must subside, sink out of sight, and then a cleared space appears before you, a kind of green *tabula rasa*; now new forms of life can begin to appear, fresh figures come forth, playfully manifest themselves, as in a waking dream, and we are under way with the creation of something new. It is like the morning of the world.

It’s just an image, of course – a naive one, even. Coleridge says that “the poet echoes the primary imagination.” I’m not going to try and tell you tonight how I believe the cosmos began, but I do think it has something to do with emptiness, the Divine alone with emptiness. Olga Broumas, a Greek-American poet, in a short prose piece called *Some Notes on Struggle and Joy*, says how much delight it is to her soul to imagine the infinite. The infinite and emptiness are not the same thing, of course, but I believe they are kin. And sometimes, when the lungs are fully emptied and then slowly, slowly begin to fill, you can have the feeling that the filling with air might have no end. No less than the capacity to breathe, and not unlike it, the capacity to imagine seems like an endowment of extraordinary symbolic resonance. And the centre of many spiritual practices has to do with a focus upon breathing, a physiological activity which has almost endless associative connections.

When I begin a poem, the page is as blank for me as it is for even the most beginning writer. We are all apprentices to that emptiness, all perpetual beginners. I hope, each time, to surprise myself. I hope to be changed. I don’t want to be able to predict what is coming, but I know I want it to come out of the emptiness, out of unconception, into being. Lord, let me not lose my emptiness.

The poem wants you **rhythmical**. “Rhythm” means “flow,” and “metre” means “measure.” Something flows in language, and you take delight in measuring it; as I said earlier, the aim is to irrigate the reader. I like what Theodore Roethke says of his remarkable, innovative “Lost Son” poems: “It’s the spring and rush of the child I’m after.” “Mother Goose,” says Donald Hall, “is a better poet than W.H. Auden.” I’m guessing he means that the rhythms are more irresistible. Auden is rhythmical, for sure, and brilliantly so, but can he match this?

Diddle, diddle, dumpling, my son John,
Went to bed with his britches on,
One stocking off and one stocking on,
Diddle diddle dumpling, my son John.

Now *there's* what Wordsworth would call "metrical excitement"! Or how about this?

Here am I,
Little Jumping Joan;
When nobody's with me,
I'm all alone.

In many poems, the information is along for the ride. The ride's the thing—"the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation," as Hopkins has it. I mentioned Niels Bohr just a while ago. David Bohm, another physicist, a mystically inclined one, who coined the terms "implicate order" for the inner world or worlds, and "explicate order" for the outer, suggests that a tree, say, only *looks* solid to us because we're seeing one frame per second, not all the other frames – sixteen or eighteen or thirty-two, however many it actually is, which are the molecular reality, if you like. We live, it seems, in a snapshot universe, one which has severe perceptual limitations, and perhaps the poet, in being innately rhythmical, is restoring complexity, is, to use another phrase from Hopkins, trying "to give beauty back to beauty's giver" by setting bundles of syllables in motion, casting onto the page, onto the explicate level, evidence of the ongoing, primarily invisible flux of the universe.

Let me give you a little bit of Hopkins: "Spring and Fall." And here's a poem by Marge Piercy, "To Be of Use," a poem less formal than the Hopkins but with an irresistible pulse to it, a piece I never tire of saying.

In such writing, which is free, not formal but definitely rhythmical, you feel yourself in the presence of a pattern of stresses. In America, William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound wanted to modernize verse, heave the pentameter overboard, but, said Williams, "we must not lose measure." To me there's something wonderfully deceptive in poetry in that often very disparate thoughts, even outlandish associations, are bound together and borne along by the music of the flow – even in free verse, yes, absolutely in free verse, where the patterning is going on in all kinds of ways but often subliminally, below the surface.

When the rhythms of a poem are right, there's an entrancement; a spell is cast. This doesn't make the poem unreal compared with the so-called real world; the poem can open up the world from inside and reveal to us, in microcosm, and sometimes in eruptive ways, some of the amazing complexities of movement going on within it. And for myself as a writer, I can go weeks or months without a poem, weeks and months in which I have had plenty of experiences, thoughts, dreams, opinions, and all the rest of it, but there has been no initiating rhythm – no lightning strike, if you will, to set the dry grass blazing.

T.S. Eliot, who once described "The Waste Land" as just "some rhythmical grumbling," in one of his essays memorably likens the "meaning" of a poem to a piece of sirloin steak the thief takes with him when he's going to break into a house; when the breaking-in begins, and the watch dog predictably roars up, the thief hands over the meat to the dog to chomp on and be distracted by, and then goes about his business of robbing the house. The robbing is rhythmical, I think, and the meat/meaning is, as it were, a red herring. In spells, prayers, hymns, liturgies, incantations, blessings, curses, songs, lullabies, and the like, the rhythms have magical properties. And how does the Duke Ellington piece go?

“Don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing, doo wah doo wah doo wah doo wah doo wah.”

The poem wants to be **itself**. It should be unlike anything you have written before: different occasions, different responses, is what I often say. We need to be various. If our poems are to have “fidelity to experience,” which is what Denise Levertov asks for – and I take that to mean that they should be *like our lives*—then each moment, occasion, event, unprecedented as it is, asks of us fresh patterns, new constellations of language and thought. Writing, let me say it again, should be daring. As improvisers, it is our job to venture into what is “not foreseen.” No one here tonight could say: “I’m going to be so bored by the dreams I’m going to have in the next ten years.” Or: “Tonight is Friday; too bad – it’s all repeats, re-runs.”

Of course it has kin, this new poem which wants to be itself. It has affinities to what you have done before; inevitably, there is some of the same DNA in there. That is one more topic of true complexity. But let us say: no formulas, please; beware descriptive reflexes. At the beginning of the oratorio I have mentioned, here’s another phrase the chorus sings: “strip me of usual song.” And Donald Hall speaks comically of the kind of poem he claims writing workshops in the United States turn out – the McPoem, about as distinctive as a thin, dry, mass-produced burger. I’m not saying that is fair, but it’s an image that stays with you.

When I was teaching a graduate manuscript seminar one time, I collected a number of blurbs from recent collections of poetry and asked the student writers to look for some common denominators – which quality of these various poems seemed to be most praised by fellow poets and critics. The word we detected was “fresh” – freshness was, across the board, said to be the main positive quality of those writings. I believe it’s Joseph Conrad who talks about the necessity of using “the fresh, usual words.” There’s one of the better challenges for the writer, don’t you think? Again, and as always, the challenge of paradox.

So the poem wants to be itself; it wants to be fresh; it does not deny its DNA but it wants to do something new also, to move on, a quality D.H. Lawrence praised in Walt Whitman: “Whitman has meant so much to me,” writes Lawrence, “Whitman, the one man breaking the way ahead.” And I like how Elizabeth Drew puts it, less grandly, but accurately: “The living poets carry the language forward.” We have a responsibility to our time – our unprecedented time – to be of it, to contribute to it

I like being a living poet. (Consider the alternative.) I like having work to do; I like the work and the play, the inextricable mix of the two. When my children were younger and asked me to do something I might not have anticipated, such as driving to pick them up somewhere across town on a snowy, slippery night, and I’d do it, and they’d thank me, sure, I’d say—or at least most of the time—it’s my job and my joy. Poetry is my job and my joy. And I want the poem, each individual poem, to be itself. Sometimes you get the question: what’s your favorite poem? The trick answer is: my next one. Maybe I will get it more right than I did last time – whatever that exactly means – and the poem will be more itself than anything I have ever written before.

The poem wants to be **complex**. Is that always true? Probably not, but when it wants to be simple, which happens, the simplicity should be a significant one. The differences between the simplicity of an experienced poet and of a beginning poet would be a study in itself.

Tom McGrath, in an interview, makes a useful distinction between a tactical and a strategic poem. The tactical poem is written for an occasion – a political demonstration, say – and it will be a poster rather than an oil painting, the very best poster you can paint, and it will serve its moment. Or that is its aim. As I say: different occasions, different responses.

I like complexity in poetry. I don't mind wrestling with the poem for its meanings; I like layers and levels. I like what Wallace Stevens says: "A poem should resist the intelligence almost successfully." I like Maurice Ravel's distinction between complexity and complication: "complexe mais pas compliqué," as he said once of a musical score.

Congestion is not complexity; it is congestion. James Wright, whom I have already quoted talking about Chinese poetry and the imaginative space he loved in it, also talks about how a recent long brilliant poem by a prominent American poet had impressed him so much, he realized that it had pressed him out flat; he didn't feel as if he had been able to live a poem: "I felt as if I'd been run over by a truck," he says. He ascribes this to "a kind of anxiety of the poet's egotism."

I see a good amount of anxious writing; the causes are often subliminal, of course, and difficult to discern, to diagnose. In contemporary poetry, some of the poets on whom the younger poets may model themselves I find wordy, too self-spectacular in their consciousness. Sometimes, I feel like echoing the Emperor in the movie *Amadeus*, who, as I remember, after hearing the young composer play a piece, declares: "Too many notes, my dear Mozart."

I want to say again: I don't mind being wrong. Philip Levine, visiting a workshop once, said that he told his students that fifty percent of what they did would go right by him because he was who he was. For myself, I am of a certain age, background, gender, experience, and the like. My tastes are very eclectic, I like many kinds of poetry, but I can't pretend there aren't things I like poetry to do, things I care less for it to do. And sometimes my reactions and decisions can be too quick.

One of my favourite stories involves (once again) Maurice Ravel, studying at the Conservatoire with Gabriel Fauré, showing his teacher the score of his string quartet – eventually one of his best-known works – and having it handed back to him rather promptly, with some disdain, by Fauré. A few days later, Fauré asked to see the score again. Ravel asked why, since his famous elder seemed to consider the work "rubbish" (that's Ravel's word). Fauré's reply? "I could have been wrong."

When poems are difficult for me, sometimes I record them, listen a few times, let them sink in and circulate in me, gradually become more intimate with them; this resembles, to some extent, the intimacy a poet experiences while bringing parts and pieces of a poem together. Such micro-work it is, such a poring over (and over and over), such a fine-tuning. When I have just occasionally written a review of a book of poetry, I have first recorded the book – a typical book will take about an hour and a half – and then listened three or four times before writing the review. With my poetry workshops, when we have, say, six or seven poems to discuss one week, in addition to other activities, such as writing together and saying poems by heart, I will usually record those poems and give their complexities (and intimacies) the best possible chance to live inside me before I write my comments on them.

One of my little tricks, when a poem seems to me to be over-written – too many notes, too complicated – is to suggest that the poet make a version using only every other line, starting either with line one or line two – and see how fifty

percent of it comes across, what is lost, what might possibly be gained. This mechanical act, the omitting of every other line, often creates incoherences, of course, with thoughts broken in half; the disjunctions can be extreme, but sometimes imaginative spaces are opened, there is room to stroll in the poem and be among its connections (a variation on James Wright's idea of imaginative space.)

Osip Mandelstam's essay on Dante likens the writing of a poem to crossing a river from one bank to the other by jumping onto the decks of boats that are passing in two directions. You want gaps and leaps in poetry; you also want to land on the deck of sometimes elusive boats rather than in the water between them. Exercises can, on occasion, teach us something about judging those leaps.

If I'm feeling especially devilish, I might suggest the same trick but starting with the last line, or the penultimate line, working backwards, seeing what results from that. And maybe even the left half of the poem, then the right half—see where you are typically placing your thought, see how your syntax is at work and play (or not). “Nothing to lose but your dignity,” I sometimes say to my students – and perhaps to the would-be poem itself, which is having to put up with such stunts from me. Really, in the interests of shaking loose in a poem what I sense is potential within it, but is presently congealed in old habits of thought or a form that is simply not working as it might, I have no shame. If it sometimes takes this kind of prescribed/suggested frivolity behind the scenes to bring the poem to fuller life, then that's how it is going to be. Nothing to lose but your dignity.

Before I leave the theme of complexity, I want to talk about simplicity as a valid point of departure, something to bounce off, if you like, into genuine complexity. Attentiveness itself – watching, observing the so-called real world – I see as a hard surface, and I often recommend attentiveness to the younger poet as a place to proceed from. On a regular basis, be in one place, watch (with all your senses) what is going on there; be a witness of it; be faithful to what William Stafford calls “the always arriving present.”

As I understand theme and variations in music – and I have favourite pieces which are “variations on a theme by”, such as Brahms' variations on a theme by Handel or by Haydn, or Britten's variations on a theme by Purcell – it seems it is the basic simplicity of the theme which initiates the idea of variation in the mind of the composer. Rather than preclude complexity, the simplicity – a four-square tune, for example, even “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” – invites the composer's imagination to the often elaborate dance.

So, working with young writers, I'm never ashamed of simple or basic points of departure. For me, writing assignments in the classroom have four main characteristics: everyone in the room is able to do *something* with them; they are based on poems I admire and love, or strategies I admire and love and likely use myself; they give the imagination room to move in all kinds of directions – inward, upward, outward; and, lastly, they should be *fun*. I think it was H.L. Mencken who described Puritanism as “a haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.” Frost says that the poet “begins in delight and ends in wisdom”; Hopkins speaks of “the fine delight that fathers thought.” I know that delight and fun are not exactly synonymous, but I'd say they are in the same zone, and I believe that a good writing assignment in the classroom, at any level of experience, should strike sparks of delight (or fun or happiness) in the student writer. Not only nothing to lose but your dignity, but also, perhaps, your solemnity; also your fear of seeming ridiculous to others. When you are under way with something, grasped by it rather than grasping it (there's a big difference between the two), that kind of

self-consciousness can fall away, and a new sense of freedom enters, and we begin to go somewhere, with everything to discover.

There are so many more things that the poem wants, and these are just a handful of them, as I discern it. Finally, the poem wants **more** from you – more than you might dare to think of giving as you begin. Finally, it wants **all** of you – you the writer, you the reader – the “whole soul . . . brought into being.” You give it all you have, and what you have expands as you work, as you play. The imagination is a vast instrument; let us try to draw from it as much as we can, poem by poem by poem. In these attempts, writers and teachers and readers – apprentices, as we are—good luck to us all.

We began by saying a poem together; let’s end the same way. Once again, I’ll feed you the lines. This is one of the best pieces I know ever written by children – you can’t have much more fun than this! It was written by third grade students at Wahpeton Elementary School in Wahpeton, North Dakota, during a week’s visit by a poet working for the COMPAS (Community Programs in the Arts and Sciences) programme of St. Paul Minnesota. Here we go:

The Luscious, Very Kissy, Smoochy Valentine Poem

Kiss me sweetheart,
I’m your brainless mudpie.
Kiss me, baby,
You’re an empty piece of paper
for me to smooch
with muddy lizard fish lips.
I love you true
Like $0 + 0 = 2$ zeros,
But even math has problems!
Kiss me sweetheart,
My blue kangaroo.
I love you true
As bats hate light!
be my earthquake, darling,
Be my molten lava honeybun
And we’ll spin around
Like Earth kissing Mars!
Kiss me, luscious lips,
Pulverize me,
Make me melt
Like ice cream.
Kiss me darling,
My dancing pineapple,
My rubber cement
My broccoli popsicle.
Kiss me, you fool!

alex runchman

“the school in which we learn”: delmore schwartz and education

Delmore Schwartz was a precocious student. In October 1931, when he was seventeen, he wrote from the University of Wisconsin to his friend, Julian Sawyer, telling him “The library is a dream, has files of the *Criterion*, *Dial*, *Bookman* – fourteen volumes of Pascal, and Pound, Eliot, H. Crane, Kenneth Burke even” (*Letters*, 6). In his next letter, he informed Sawyer “I was taken from the freshman English class (‘You don’t belong here’) and put to studying Shakespearean drama: education?” (*Letters*, 8) and, a month later, reported that his English teacher had told him “Do not come to classes unless you want to – cut whenever you feel like [it]. Why are you here anyway? Do you think there is anything to teach you?” (*Letters*, 18) Schwartz immediately follows this anecdote with a mock-modest gesture – “I have not read Rimbaud for a year” (*Letters*, 18) – no doubt conscious that most of his fellow students, whom he had earlier criticised for not having read William Carlos Williams (*Letters*, 6), would not have read Rimbaud at all.

These remarks reveal the teenaged Schwartz delighting in his superior knowledge of American modernist and French symbolist poetry, and adopting a dismissive attitude towards his teacher: it is implied that he, Schwartz, is better-read and more intelligent. The vaunting tone may be hard to take, but Schwartz’s comments do raise interesting questions concerning the nature and purposes of education. What are we to make, for example, of that baffled question – “education?” Is Schwartz implying that, for him, being “put to study” Shakespeare is hardly educative? Is it something he perceives of as merely pleasurable? If so, what can we discern from his association of education with the kind of learning that is only undertaken reluctantly? Perhaps the question is simply a cry of indignation: what kind of education can Schwartz be receiving if his teacher has nothing to teach him, and, in any case, is there really anyone, however knowledgeable, who is beyond teaching? For the student who does seem already to know everything, perhaps the more important lesson is in fact one in understanding how and why one doesn’t “belong”.

Schwartz clearly felt that his learning entitled him to assume the role of teacher in his correspondence with Sawyer. In one letter, he sets Sawyer a Benjamin Franklin-esque programme of self-improvement. Amongst the tasks set are several concerned principally with the acquisition of knowledge or with the honing of an artistic sensibility. Schwartz demands that Sawyer “read a page in the dictionary every day”, “read a chapter in *Logic* (Aristotle) every day”, and “spend an hour writing one sentence with the goal: approximate perfection of precision” (*Letters*, 8). There is also, however, an element of moral and ethical instruction, most extraordinarily when Schwartz requires that Sawyer be

pure of insincerity, laziness, anger, procrastination, discourtesy, inconsideration, affectation, misunderstanding, absent-mindedness, temporal desire, worry over time, vanity, sensitivity, dignity, loud speech, insulting commentary, irony, arrogance, pomposity, luxuriousness, sublimation, misapprehension, uncleanliness, bizarre dress, consideration of money, jealousy, hero-worship, – and thusward. (*Letters*, 8)

Many of these are qualities that we know Schwartz himself found harder to acquire than a comprehensive knowledge of canonical English Literature. They

are all concerned with that difficult aspect of education that deals with values rather than verifiable fact – values that cannot be acquired through classroom teaching alone and that must also be nurtured within the family and the wider community. This distinction is important because throughout Schwartz's oeuvre he tends to express the utmost regard for learning born of individual enquiry and endeavour, but a general disregard for the institutional aspects of education.

Schwartz's undergraduate letters to Sawyer represent his first serious engagement with education as a subject. It becomes a prominent concern. Many of the poems in *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, published in 1938 when Schwartz was twenty-four, suggest that the most valuable learning is about personal experience and discovering things for oneself, although they also allude to and acknowledge the figures who most influenced Schwartz's own thinking. Meanwhile *Genesis*, Schwartz's long, unfinished poem of immigration and self-development, considers more directly the *process* of education, confronting its protagonist Hershey Green's experiences of kindergarten and the encounters that enable him to establish his own identity. The short story "A Bitter Farce" draws upon Schwartz's own ordeals at the front of the class, raising questions of what exactly a teacher's role ought to be, and many of Schwartz's essays also have an educative focus. Schwartz's later poems, meanwhile, celebrate what he called "summer knowledge", a kind of knowledge that, "in a way, [...] is not knowledge at all" but "second nature, first nature fulfilled" (SK, 158): it is in these poems that Schwartz most explicitly distances himself from the book learning that had nonetheless defined and informed his entire career. Their tone is not exactly anti-intellectual, and Schwartz never gives up his characteristic allusions; but the emphasis tends to be upon the natural world and, implicitly, upon unlearning the civilised conventions that might actually become an obstruction to truly creative understanding. This is particularly apparent in a poem such as "The Studies of Narcissus" in which the speaker celebrates "the natural knowledge" of the river and describes it as the "universal school" (*Last*, 64, 69). The very last piece Schwartz published, the "Preface" to a selection of poems written by students on his poetry composition course at Syracuse University, also considers the tensions between "professional competence" ("The Present State of Poetry", 47) and untutored inspiration through its discussion of the challenges and possible rewards of teaching the writing of poetry in a formal way.

In celebrating individual enterprise and challenging institutional learning, Schwartz was contributing to a growing tradition of American writing about education. Throughout the 1930s, Ezra Pound published *How to Read* (1931), *The ABC of Reading* (1934) and *Culture* (1938), but the seminal critique of the education offered by the academy was *The Education of Henry Adams*, published posthumously in 1918. Adams concludes that his nineteenth-century education was wholly inadequate in preparing him, as an individual, for twentieth-century experience. His indictment of Harvard and his sense of his own exceptional potential must have resonated with Schwartz. "He did not want to be one in a hundred", Adams writes of his younger self, "one per cent of an education. He regarded himself as the only person for whom his education had value, and he wanted the whole of it" (Adams, 43). Similar challenges are also discernible in the earlier writings of Emerson and Whitman, and, before them, Franklin. Whitman had written in "Song of Myself": "he most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher" (Whitman, 73). Although this is particularly open to interpretation as a statement about poetic influence – suggesting that apprentice poets must depart from their mentors and find their own style – it also implies

more generally that the best thing *all* students can learn from their teachers is how to think for themselves, which must therefore lead to an ultimate rejection of the teachers' ideas as they come to adopt their own.

In Schwartz's case, the teachers he most admired were those who were themselves most sceptical about what could be taught. Writing to Paul Goodman in 1935, Schwartz commented gleefully on his Harvard philosophy professor Alfred North Whitehead's "contempt for scholarship and learning", which "is constantly repeated, as in his books" (*Letters*, 26). "Contempt" is surprisingly forceful here, and the claim is astonishing given that Whitehead, the author of *Process and Reality* and one of the acknowledged intellects of his age, would seem to have been deeply invested in the activities of scholarship and learning. However, "scholarship" and "learning" as used by Schwartz in this context imply only the narrow and conventional acquisition of knowledge; it is not the case that Whitehead (or Schwartz) believed that education was worthless *per se*, but rather that one ought to query all received ideas. It must be conceded, however, that it is the privilege only of those who have already acquired a great deal of learning to be able to regard it with such contempt.

Schwartz's developing ideas about education and learning are best appreciated through a consideration of his poems, stories and essays themselves. *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* contains a number of poems in which the authority of a teacher figure is resisted. In "Father and Son", for example, the son is initially reluctant to listen to his father's counsel. In response to the father's contention that he is afraid of time and will try to evade the fact of his eventual death, the son protests,

I question the sentiment you give to me,
As premature, not to be given, learned alone
When experience shrinks upon the chilling bone. (SK, 30)

He does not deny that his father might be right. His objection is rather that the "sentiment" is one that he is not yet ready to learn. Furthermore, it is something that he will have to experience for himself, however unpleasant that might be and however much his father wishes to prepare him. This does not invalidate the advice, but it does expose the relative impotence of the father as teacher. He can impart theoretical wisdom but not felt experience. Although the son eventually comes round to his father's way of thinking, remarking at the end of the poem "My father has taught me to be serious" (SK, 33), this is perhaps too easy a concession and it is certainly only the beginning of a longer process of self-recognition.

Something similar is suggested in "Faust in Old Age" in which the doctor, facing damnation, tells of how he discovered that all his desires were rotten:

I knocked each nut to find the meat;
A worm was there and not a mint.

Metaphysicians could have told me this
But each learns for himself, as in the kiss. (SK, 49)

We might remember that Faust was himself a kind of metaphysician and that without his great learning he would have been unable to construct the casuistic argument that persuades him to sell his soul to the Devil: we are all sinners, so

we are all damned anyway; therefore there is nothing to be lost. His apparent wisdom leads him towards his fate, and proves useless in preparing him for the lack of fulfilment he encounters and for the ultimate horror of his end. Given his fate, Faust's tender evocation of the kiss in these lines is surprising, but the comparison is not incongruous. Whatever children might think they know about kissing from seeing it done in the movies or elsewhere, they cannot really know what it is like until they have kissed and been kissed themselves; and it is absurd to think of having formal lessons in kissing, although it is a more universal activity than many of the other things one learns in school.

Further examples similarly illustrate that the most fundamental learning is done for oneself. In "A Young Child and His Pregnant Mother" a child drops a penny between a subway grate and "learn[s] out all loss" (SK, 43); later, we are told that the birth of his as yet unborn brother "shall teach him of his exile from his mother" (SK, 44). Once again, these are crucial lessons, but not ones that can be taught in class. And even an overtly intellectual poem such as the long uncategorisable "Coriolanus and His Mother" – in which the ghosts of Aristotle, Freud and Marx watch a performance of Shakespeare's play and offer their own interpretations – leaves one with a stronger sense of the speaker's "intolerable emotion" at the end of the play than of any academic summation.

Schwartz's sense of learning as a process of working out one's feelings and attitudes for oneself has an important analogue in Whitman's "Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it yourself" (Whitman, 72). A teacher, however, might be able to give directions and to offer advice on how to approach the difficulties one might encounter on the road. In none of Schwartz's poems is the value of the teacher as a *facilitator* of learning questioned; the apprehension is merely about the teacher's limitations when it comes to passing on direct experience, particularly if one believes, like Adams, that the individual is the only person for whom one's education really matters. It is for this reason that time, rather than any person, might ultimately be the best teacher. This view might seem abstract and clichéd, but it is encapsulated vividly and subtly in the slightly varying refrain of Schwartz's "Calmly We Walk through This April's Day". At the end of the first stanza, Schwartz asks

What will become of you and me
(This is the school in which we learn...)
Besides the photo and the memory?
(...that time is the fire in which we burn.) (SK, 66)

The observation about what we learn is parenthetical here, seemingly incidental, and yet it interrupts the anxious question of how we might be remembered after death, before being itself interrupted by further qualification of that question. The unspecified "school" at this point in the poem seems primarily to be the very fact of reflecting on the passage of time: only by acknowledging the particular moment in history (in this case, the year "Nineteen Thirty-Seven"), and by contemplating how so many around us are either "running away" or have been "taken away", can we come to realize, experientially rather than theoretically, that we are continually being consumed by time ourselves and must eventually burn down to nothing. Time, the school, and the fire, which are distinct at the beginning of the poem, are conflated at the end. The sense of them becoming one and the same thing is heightened by the fact that the refrain, previously sounded across lines, has become a couplet.

Time is the school in which we learn,
Time is the fire in which we burn. (SK, 67)

If time is at once the school *and* the fire, then the lessons it offers are exciting, painful and dangerous: like fire, they threaten to be all-consuming and to destroy all former semblances of knowledge. But although we may all be in the fire together, that does not mean that we all experience it in the same way.

School is undoubtedly a fire for Hershey Green, the protagonist of Schwartz's next book, *Genesis*. His most important lessons do not concern his school subjects – at which he generally excels – but his own emotional development. Nothing could be more exciting for Hershey than starting at kindergarten, partly because “Kindergarten was the place where thrilling games were played” but, more importantly, because it also represents for him “the advancement of the ego” (*Genesis*, 100). (Again, one might think of Adams and his view of himself “as the only person for whom his education had value”.) It is a source of great pride for Hershey to say “I go to school”, although his first experiences of formal education in fact dent his ego:

he knew at once disappointment, frustration, and failure, because he could not paste correctly a design of colored papers, seeing that the other children did it with ease and with pleasure. (*Genesis*, 100)

The ease and pleasure with which the other children perform this task expose not only Hershey's inexperience, but also his sense of how different he is from them. Later, in an unpublished draft from *Genesis: Book II*, he experiences a similar sense of frustration when he is unable to make his bed properly at camp. Education in these instances is seen to be a process that homogenises society and culture. Hershey, at this stage, is simply unable to “paste correctly”; but, given his burgeoning ego, one wonders whether he would be content to do so even if he could.

Schwartz himself repeatedly resists such conformity in his poetry, and the very form of *Genesis* is a good case in point. If one takes it to be a kind of *bildungsroman*, then, by definition, it ought to have been written as a novel. The work does possess novelistic qualities, but it also contains features typically associated with lyric verse, narrative verse, dramatic verse, and the epic. However, with its combination of Biblical prose (spoken by Hershey himself) and blank verse commentaries (spoken by the audience of ghosts who listen to his story), it cannot be categorised as any one of these. Schwartz pointed out that his use of the dead as commentators had a precedent in Dante and argued that his use of commentaries also reflected much of the experience of modern life (Schwartz and Laughlin, 159). This does not conceal, however, how unconventional the poem must have appeared even to readers schooled in the modernist works of Eliot, Pound and Williams. “Art abhors didacticism” (*Genesis*, vii), Schwartz states in his prefatory note, and a didactic view of what poetry is and what it ought to be would not adequately prepare a student for the experience of reading *Genesis* or, indeed, Schwartz's later poetry, which is characterized by further stylistic experimentation. “Pasting correctly”, or conforming to what others do “with ease and with pleasure” rather than attempting something untypical with difficulty and with risk, does not advance – and may forestall – developments in art and thought.

If Hershey learns about how different he is at school, then he also comes to realise that many of his experiences are not unique. When he describes an early lesson in injustice – being sent out of the classroom for kicking another child who had kicked him first, while the other child remains unpunished – Hershey sets the incident in a broad historical context: “Exiled, humiliated, persecuted, Coriolanus, Joseph, and Caesar, the child resumes history, each enacts all that has been” (*Genesis*, 101). Though it is only retrospectively that Hershey is able to identify his experience with those of his Roman and Biblical compatriots in exile, and though the aggrandisement of what would seem to be a trivial enough occurrence gives it a comic tint, the episode illustrates that Hershey’s lesson is both timeless and universal. He was not sent to school to learn about unfair punishment, but it is instrumental to his development, and he must experience it for himself first-hand if he is to understand it fully.

The ghost-commentators in *Genesis* help Hershey to become more aware of his position in the world and to view his earlier experiences with ironic detachment, but they are not teachers themselves, and their chief purpose, they freely admit, is to be entertained at Hershey’s expense, not to offer him advice. “School is the wide world, at five years old”, one points out, adding that “Release from mother’s rule” is initially liberating until the “Nero ego” once again encounters resistance to its will (*Genesis*, 102). Another ghost suggests, in a humorous aside that nonetheless presents a sombre view of human nature and of the tendencies of formal education, that the kindergarten is essentially a “Congress of thirty Ids, like a convention / Of a small radical party” (*Genesis*, 102). This suggestion that classroom behaviour might anticipate later social and political engagement is further developed in a late novella, *The Hartford Innocents*. This work, which invites comparison with Randall Jarrell’s *Pictures from an Institution*, revolves around a scandal at a girls’ college and features a character remarking that “an institution of education is an epitome of America itself, a microcosm of the great, sprawling, rich, and somewhat disunited states” (*Successful Love*, 238). “Somewhat disunited” because, if it really is in the nature of education to homogenise, then this is nonetheless a purpose that can never wholly be achieved, since there will always be defiant individuals who refuse to conform to what they have been taught, or those who accept some aspects of their education but resist others.

Such a comment also raises the question of what it means to be in receipt of a specifically American education, a question of particular importance for a child such as Hershey, the son of Jewish immigrants. At one point, Hershey’s parents argue about whether or not the boy should receive a traditional Jewish education. This is not a topic on which they dwell long, however: it is more important to them that he be accepted as an American than that he be schooled in the Old World customs they had themselves forsaken. Consequently, like so many other American children, Hershey imagines himself as “a Giant star and also the President of the United States”, heralded by Sousa’s “The Stars and Stripes Forever” which he had heard in school assembly (*Genesis*, 181). One of his proudest childhood achievements is writing the name “WOODROW WILSON” on a blackboard his parents bought him one Christmas (*Genesis*, 106). He is learning patriotism as well as writing. Patriotism of this kind may be seen as one of the normalising ends of a typical education, and, in many cases, is a positive attribute. It is a sign of educational maturity, however, to be able to question the political assumptions on which one’s country’s government is based, and, in later,

unpublished episodes Hershey becomes much more independent-minded, devising his own ideal state to be called “The True Republic”.

This question of an American education especially preoccupies Schwartz because, as a teacher and lecturer, and even as a critic and editor, he was responsible for delivering such an education at tertiary level and beyond. Like many of his contemporaries – including Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, and Randall Jarrell – Schwartz made his living principally through teaching, and, like them, found it a source of both frustration and inspiration. He would probably have agreed with the professor in Berryman’s “Wash Far Away” who reflects, at the start, that “Teaching was worthy, and indispensable; but it was dull. No riskiness lived in it” (Berryman, “Wash Far Away”, 369). However, Berryman’s story, like Schwartz’s “A Bitter Farce”, goes some way towards suggesting that, if a teacher is fully invested in his subject, there *can* be risk, and even revelation. As he became more comfortable with teaching, Schwartz enjoyed pointing out how it is a “wonderful professional secret that the teacher learns much more than the students” (*Letters*, 158). And, even though many of the accounts of Schwartz in front of the class are unflattering, he did inspire devotion in some students – most notably Lou Reed, who described Schwartz as “the first great man that I had ever met” (Reed). It is probable that Schwartz was a better teacher *outside* the classroom than in it, informally holding court in New York’s White Horse Tavern or offering lucid insights through his critical prose.

The question of American education is especially prominent in “A Bitter Farce”, in which the youthful Shenandoah Fish – a character whose experiences closely resemble Schwartz’s own – teaches composition to Navy students during the Second World War. Fish is quickly forced to reconsider his assumption that, as a teacher, his responsibility is simply to teach his students how to spell. When asked by a student whether or not he would marry a black woman, for example, Fish – who is self-conscious about his own Jewishness – is evasive. The question does, however, lead him to address his own stance on race prejudice.

He said to himself that he was only a teacher of the ways to use the powerful English language. But language was involved in all things, and he felt now a sense of insufficiency and withdrawal. He had turned aside, as often before; he had side-stepped a matter about which he felt that he ought to be direct, blunt and frank as to his conviction and belief (“A Bitter Farce”, 108).

Fish comes to realise that one can never “only” be a teacher of one thing. Convictions and beliefs are subjective and must be worked out by individuals for themselves: they cannot be taught, as such. A teacher can, however, guide his students towards considering the principles on which to ground their convictions and beliefs. As the story progresses, this particular responsibility becomes more urgent for Fish since he becomes increasingly aware of his students’ anti-Semitic attitudes. The class reads an essay by Louis Adamic on the immigrant in America: its inclusion on the syllabus is evidently intended to prompt the students into thinking about what it means to be American. Fish concludes, however, that Adamic’s argument – that “the hope of the world... was [in America] just because of [its] diversity of peoples” – is simplistic. “[I]f America has always been the land of liberty”, he explains, “it has also been the land of the witch-hunt and the lynching party” (“A Bitter Farce”, 114). Race riots and social unrest, he argues, are a direct consequence of America also being “the land of liberty”. At the end of the class, however, despite his own intense engagement with the complexities of the

topic, Fish remains dissatisfied. He fears that he has indulged in mere “verbalism” rather than actually teaching anything to the class (“A Bitter Farce”, 119). Once again, the teacher is seen to be limited because he cannot make his students *experience* what they need to feel in order to understand the issue in its entirety; but this is not to say that the endeavour is worthless.

It is a central anxiety of “The True, The Good, The Beautiful” – a sequence of dramatic monologues from Schwartz’s 1950 collection *Vaudeville for a Princess* spoken by a philosopher-king figure – that the benefits of education, and particularly of an education in poetry, are not straightforwardly measurable. Schwartz’s willingness to teach trainee Naval officers during the War was a contributory factor towards him avoiding the draft. He was uneasy about how this might be perceived, however, and was acutely conscious of his prominence as a non-serving intellectual at the time. Although he never publicly aired his criticisms of America’s involvement in the War, Schwartz was quick to defend himself when William Carlos Williams accused anti-War intellectuals of being unpatriotic. Even in wartime, he argued, a country needed its thinkers and, as a teacher putting right his students’ use of language (which had become damaged), he regarded himself as a kind of “dentist”, not unlike Dr Williams himself in *his* quotidian profession (*Letters*, 120). The analogy is helpful insofar as it establishes that a nation’s cultural and linguistic well-being is as important as its physical health. But whereas Williams’ importance as a doctor would be immediately apparent, it is less easy to discern whether or not a country’s artistic or intellectual life is flourishing, or what the benefits of this might be.

The speaker of “The True, The Good, The Beautiful” does what he can to justify the position further. Emphasising his role as both student and teacher, he attempts to answer the accusation that he has been living sensually whilst other boys lie “slumped like sacks on desperate shores” (*Vaudeville*, 55). His profession as poet-teacher, he maintains, has caused him to be cut off “From the normal pleasures of the citizen” (*Vaudeville*, 55), and he has sought to turn his apparently solitary study to the general good. “I try to tell [the boys and girls] the little I know of truth” (*Vaudeville*, 54), he claims, later pleading, “I taught them of the early morning light: / May I not cite this as a little good?” (*Vaudeville*, 55). The speaker’s arguments here are uncertain, but the poems are intriguing because of the tensions they present between social engagement and social withdrawal and because of the speaker’s persistent concern about whether his teaching and his poetry (which, in this sequence, are essentially the same thing) have any value. The uncertainty arises partly because the audience’s agreement as to the ultimate purpose of education cannot be assumed. To the fellow poet or artist, the worth of studying the early morning light, and of seeking out beauty even in the midst of war, may be evident enough; but to the soldier or statesman faced directly with the with the literal facts of death and destruction such an endeavour might seem insensitive and purposeless.

Schwartz never offers his own definition of the purpose of education, and it is perhaps beyond precise explication. It is likely, however, that he would have been in at least partial sympathy with the political philosopher Allan Bloom (who shares with Schwartz the distinction of having been memorialised in a novel by Saul Bellow). In *The Closing of the American Mind*, published in 1987, Bloom railed against “American conformism” (Bloom, A., 34), which he blamed upon relativism – an openness to all cultures, creeds and philosophies that nonetheless finds nothing to distinguish any of them. Schwartz spent many hours in class trying to broaden his students’ perspectives, but, by the ’80s, Bloom

suggests, the typical student's perspective had become so broad, and, consequently, so general as to be virtually meaningless. Relativism, Bloom argues, "has extinguished the real motive of education, the search for a good life" (Bloom, A., 34). This "good life" is no less abstract than Schwartz's Kantian ideals of "the true, the good, and the beautiful", to which Bloom himself also refers later in his study. The road from adolescence to adulthood, he suggests, is "the serious part of education, where animal sexuality becomes human sexuality, where instinct gives way in man to choice with regard to the true, the good and the beautiful" (Bloom, A., 134). We cannot be certain that he is alluding to Schwartz here, but an analogy is clear. Schwartz perhaps had more trust in "instinct" than Bloom, and was aware that the distinctions between "choice" and "instinct" might sometimes be blurred, but it is apparent that they each regarded a successful education as one that enriches the individual's life with high culture and refines his or her moral sense. The value of such an education cannot be measured solely in terms of practical achievements, and it is not necessarily the case that an all-encompassing education is a worthy one.

In addition to his more general views on education, Schwartz was perceptive in his assessment of the implications of teaching for poetry. He believed that the fact that so many poets of his generation had become teachers at universities constituted "a radical change" to the state of poetry in the United States "which involves not only the poet and the poetry which he writes, but the readers of poetry and their concept of the poet and of poetry" ("The Present State of Poetry", 36). For a start, he asserts, "since so many poets are teachers, it is no longer true that the poet is regarded by most other human beings as a strange and exotic being" ("The Present State of Poetry", 36). After all, "the writing of poetry is clearly a natural pursuit for the teacher of literature". More importantly, however, teaching also enables the poet to cultivate his own readership: "he is in direct communication several times a week with what is known in advertising circles as a trapped audience" who can be persuaded "that poetry is extremely interesting and that it is never too difficult or too obscure to be understood" ("The Present State of Poetry", 36, 37). In this respect, it is clearly in a poet's best interests also to be a teacher: he can directly guide his readers in their approach to his work, overcoming the apparent obscurity to which they might previously have been resistant.

Schwartz concedes, naturally, that there are also disadvantages to the poet's newly public role, noting in particular that more educational opportunities have, ironically, given more readers the confidence – and arrogance – to dismiss works merely because they do not understand them. All the same, he is resistant to the idea of simplifying literature for the sake of making it accessible to a wider audience. Teaching may, as Bellow's narrator puts it in *Ravelstein*, be "a kind of popularization" (Bellow, 22), but such simplification would be both patronising to the reader, denying them the opportunity to exercise the judgement that their education should have granted them, and inimical to the further writing of serious works. Although Schwartz had a keen sense of the popular, especially later in his life, he always remained committed to a body of literature that had survived across periods and that he believed would remain important in the future – the Western Canon which, according to the subtitle Harold Bloom gives to his study of the same name, can also be regarded as "The Books and *School* of the Ages" (my emphasis). Schwartz recognised that to appreciate such works requires sustained effort – why else would they need to be taught? – and equally that they cannot, ultimately, be accessible to all.

It is for this reason that he is so apprehensive, in a 1952 essay, about masterpieces being presented in cartoon versions that strip down the original plot or, in the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that fail to distinguish between passages in blank verse and passages in prose. The young reader's illustrated edition, he argues, "will have given him an easy and pleasant experience which becomes an obstacle to the more laborious and unfamiliar effort involved in reading poetry straight, that is to say, as it was written and as it was meant to be read" ("Masterpieces as Cartoons", 422). It would have been easy enough for Schwartz to dismiss the *Classics Illustrated* series outright, but he recognises that, flawed though they are, they do serve a purpose. He concludes that the best thing anyone who cares about literature can do is to read "both the original classics and the cartoon version", suggesting that by doing both, "he is keeping his hold on literature at its best and at the same time he is remaining aware of the experience and thus the consciousness of any other reader" ("Masterpieces as Cartoons", 429). This position suggests a commitment to the education of all other readers as well as to the great literature in question.

Schwartz's final assessment of the state of poetry in 1958 is equivocal. He quotes Robert Frost as saying in the introduction to an anthology of new poets that "school and poetry come near to being the same thing" ("The Present State of Poetry", 47) but does not agree that this is wholly to the good. He acknowledges that the new generation of poets "possess a trained and conscious skill, a sophisticated mastery of the craft of versification" that they have learned from their teachers, but he also discerns a "tamelessness" and "constrained calm" in their poems and seems undecided as to whether such "professional competence" is preferable to the intuitive but also at times erratic versification of the "inspired amateurs" who wrote poetry in the generations preceding Pound and Eliot ("The Present State of Poetry", 47). Once again, although Schwartz does not deny that such skill is necessary, we can infer his resistance to constraint, conformity, and "pasting correctly". Schwartz's own poetry of the period generally represents a departure from the formal, consciously crafted poetry embraced by the academy at mid-century and characteristically praises the instinctual knowledge derived from nature above the kind of knowledge that can be acquired in formal institutes of education.

There are times, Schwartz would surely admit, when the acquisition of factual knowledge is a necessary aim of education, even in literary study, which can generally accommodate a range of interpretations. As Berryman's professor in "Wash Far Away" puts it, convincingly, "You lose out of literature some experience every year, and you need all the knowledge you can get" (Berryman, 380). However, there is also such a thing as over-teaching, and Schwartz is alert to this possibility in all his writings on teaching. In the final piece he published, the "Foreword" to *Syracuse Poems: 1964*, he explains that discipline and a set of skills are required when writing poetry, and that these are very often "acquired slowly" and need to be "practised regularly": "it follows that one must not depend upon inspiration" (*Syracuse Poems*, vi). All the same, although the inspiration could not be channelled without the skill and discipline, Schwartz hints that it remains crucial. He can find no definitive answer to the question "Can you *really* teach anyone how to write?" and concedes that whilst "one can teach a talented writer what not to do, [...] one cannot make an untalented human being talented" (*Syracuse Poems*, vii). "The truth", he goes on, "is that writers have always sought and sometimes found, in a haphazard way, the kind of help which students in creative writing seek in an organized way", and gives as one example of this Ezra

Pound's criticism of Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway, "which was as specific and detailed as the correction of a theme in English Composition" (*Syracuse Poems*, vii). Such a conclusion leaves the reader in no doubt as to Schwartz's belief that some kind of education, whether formal or informal, is important when it comes to the writing of poetry, but also suggests his ambivalence about whether the formal setup of a creative writing class is any more or less likely to produce great writers. This is consistent with his more general views on education and his perpetual sense that the really interesting stage in one's education might be that at which one learns to think for oneself and, to use Whitman's words, "to destroy the teacher".

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john scattergood

reading between the lines in philip larkin's "naturally the foundation will bear your expenses"

In one passage of *The Name of the Rose* the young monk Adso experiences a moment of revelation about the nature of reading, having seen William de Baskeville seek to understand a book from which the dead Venantius had been making notes by referring to other books: "Until then I had thought that each book spoke of the things, human or divine, which lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books; it is as if they spoke among themselves..." (Eco, 284-286) There are many strands to Eco's rich and complex book, but one of them has to do with Adso's education. In this passage as in others he learns something important – not simply a fact, but something more profound, a way of understanding. This incident provides a paradigm of the apprenticeship method of learning: Adso sees his master do something and is instructed by it. And what he sees modifies his understanding of the way texts work. Up to that point he appears to have held to a mimetic theory of literature – books refer to some sort of external reality – but what he sees changes this, and he discovers intertextuality. As William explains: "to know what one book says you must read others..." Texts can be more complex than Adso had supposed and he acquires intertextuality as a way of reading. It is the purpose of this paper to make the case for it as a valuable educational methodology in approaching texts.

The idea that books relate to other books, that the understanding of one text may presuppose the knowledge of another or others, that literature sometimes speaks to itself with or without direct reference to the observable reality we call "the world" is not a new one. But it has been brought to prominence in the twentieth century in a variety of forms as the processes of how literature means have been brought under ever closer scrutiny. The idea of intertextuality, in a fully articulated form, emerged in the 1960s and is particularly associated with the work of Julia Kristeva, who appears to have coined the word:

Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double... (Kristeva, 37)

What this proposes is that the text is not a self-contained or self-sufficient structure. It does not arise *ex nihilo*, but contains within itself echoes, conscious or unconscious, of other texts – though "text" can be described in a number of different ways. The "intertext", the text which exists or is present within the text, may be of many sorts and have a number of functions. It may, at its broadest, be an archetypal story which, though never mentioned, underlies a particular text; or it may be a story which is mentioned. Or the "intertext" may be a source which a writer may try simultaneously to replicate and resist. Or it may be a type-scene which carries with it literary associations. More usually, however, the "intertext" will take the form of a quotation (exact or otherwise) or an allusion to something. There are those who

argue that to use a particular genre or form is to involve an intertext, because genres (in particular) and some forms carry with them expectations of meaning, which may be used to enhance the meaning of what is being said or used to question it. Intertextuality is a type of reading, an attitude which recognizes that discourse is not single. According to Michael Riffaterre it is not necessary to know the intertext precisely to recognize the “literariness” of a particular text which may lead one to interrogate what it ostensibly says:

When we speak of knowing an intertext, however, we must distinguish between the actual knowledge of the form and content of that intertext, and a mere awareness that such an intertext exists and can eventually be found somewhere. This awareness in itself may be enough to make readers experience the text’s literariness. They can do so because they perceive that something is missing from the text: gaps that need to be filled, references to an as yet unknown referent, references whose successive occurrences map out, as it were, the outline of the intertext still to be discovered. In such cases the reader’s sense that a latent intertext exists suffices to indicate the location where this intertext will eventually become manifest. (Riffaterre, 56-57)

Not everyone would agree with this last proposition, though most readers will have experienced the sense of puzzlement, when encountering a complex unfamiliar text, which will drive them to other books in the hope of enlightenment. They may feel, that is to say, that they need to educate themselves further, before approaching the text again, in a way that is essentially literary. This is another paradigm of learning, the constant iteration in search of deeper understanding and greater precision. But most intertextual critics would endorse the more general thrust of Riffaterre’s proposition that intertextuality contributes essentially to the way texts mean. It is not essentially a critical system which concerns itself with value, but with how a writer comes to generate a text and how a reader comes to understand (or misunderstand) it.

Theories of intertextuality have been powerful and influential and have interconnected with and helped to sustain other positions. Kristeva has said that a reading of Bakhtin influenced her in the formulations of her original ideas, and it is clear that his notions about the dialogism of texts – the presence of two or a polyphony of voices or discourses in some single author texts – are compatible, though for Bakhtin intertexts tend to be subversive in that they disrupt attempts to assert monologism.¹ Kristeva has also maintained that texts exist “under the jurisdiction” of other texts, and this idea of the author as an “echo chamber”, a willing or unwilling repeater of past writings, underlies Roland Barthes’s rather gloomy reflections on his own writings:

It is impossible to develop [the way he wishes to write] within duration without gradually becoming a prisoner of someone else’s words and even of my own. A stubborn after-image, which comes from all previous modes of writing and

¹ See particularly *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press: Austin, Texas, 1981).

even from the past of my own, drowns the sound of my present words. Any written trace precipitates, as inside a chemical at first transparent, innocent and neutral, mere duration gradually reveals in suspension a whole past of increasing density, like a cryptogram. (Barthes, 23)

The idea of the author not in control of his own writing, the “prisoner” of others’ words, whose voice is drowned out by other voices, all contribute to the sense that the author, in the old authoritarian sense, has undergone a “death”, that he is to some degree powerless in relation to what he is able to produce.

And all this is important for anyone who wishes to come to terms with Philip Larkin’s “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” – a poem which seems seriously to have got away from him, a poem in which what he thought he was saying was either not quite what he said or was not interpreted in the way he thought it might be interpreted.

II

The poem was written on 22 February 1961 and appeared in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). It consists of 24 lines in three tightly rhymed eight-line stanzas.² It is a first-person poem of a recognizable kind, a dramatic monologue, written in convincingly demotic and at times colloquial language (“throw up”) which at times reaches for something more resonant (“outsoar”), once by way of classical allusion: “Auster” is the south-wind, and hence south, referring to the general direction of his air journey. The poem is set in a recognizable external reality – London – and at a specific time, Armistice Day – that is, 11th November if it falls on a Sunday and on the nearest Sunday if it does not. And this external reality is emphasized by the number of names used in the poem – fifteen in all – mainly of places and of people, but including a military band, a type of British airliner, a London publisher, a BBC radio programme. The “I” of the poem ostensibly suggests an academic, or perhaps a poet, who has been to Berkeley (UCLA) and is now going to Bombay, to be met by a member of the Indian academic establishment, “Professor Lal”, and to give the same lecture or reading that he had given in America. But even as he turns over the pages of his recycled talk he is thinking ambitiously, wondering if it might be possible to use them for a talk on the BBC Third Programme or get them published by Chatto and Windus. The title of the poem, on one level, suggests a quotation from the letter of invitation, assuring the speaker that the trip will cost him nothing: he is a free-loading early jet-setter, a flawed mundane narrator, disabused, knowing, selfish. He is smug about leaving England in winter on “a dark November day” for the “sunshine” of India, and smug too about travelling in style, because he is on expenses (the Comet, an English aeroplane built by de Havilland, was the first jet airliner to go into service), and an elitist intolerant of the “Crowds, colourless and careworn” who had delayed his taxi (another elitist symbol of the early 1960s in England). It is when he recalls why the crowds are there that the poem deepens in significance – he had travelled on the day when the British (and others in the commonwealth) commemorate their war-dead by a wreath laying ceremony at Lutyens’ Cenotaph in Whitehall, attended by the sovereign, representatives of the government and church,

² See Larkin, *Collected Poems*, 134.

ambassadors and members of the establishment. This, one of the most solemn and moving of British public ceremonies, he had forgotten and in retrospect describes as “mawkish nursery games” which make him want to be sick. On a linear level this is a poem about somebody who is glad to be getting out of England, on an academic jaunt which may enhance his CV, ostensibly because of the climate; but it also addresses issues about putting distance between oneself and England in more fundamental ways too.

Larkin cannot, in any precise sense, be the “I” narrator of the poem: he did not go to Berkeley or to Bombay at this time. But that did not prevent early commentators on this poem from assuming that this narrator was a mouthpiece for his views – for which Larkin was criticized. In an interview with Ian Hamilton he makes the point: “one editor refused it on the grounds, and I quote, that it was “rather hard on the Queen”; several people have asked what it was like in Bombay!”³ But though these are misreadings there is some reason for this sort of reaction: elsewhere Larkin had expressed criticism of the British establishment, the military and ceremonial. And elsewhere he had fantasized about shedding responsibilities and escaping, what he called “This audacious, purifying, / Elemental move.” (*Collected Poems*, p.85) Or again, from “Toads”:

Lots of folk live on their wits;
Lecturers, lispers,
Losels, loblolly-men, louts –
They don”t end as paupers. (*Collected Poems*, 89)

But this clearly did not cohere with what sort of poem Larkin thought he had written: “I have never written a poem which has been less understood” he complained in the interview with Ian Hamilton (*Further Requirements*, 25) and he spends a lot of time, on various occasions, seeking to rebut this reading of the poem. In another interview, this time with John Haffenden, when asked if it was “meant to be just a funny poem in which the speaker is the butt of the joke”, Larkin had replied “It is both funny and serious. The speaker is a shit. That’s always serious.” (*Further Requirements*, 58)

Others also came to his defence. John Wain defended the poem as a “serious” topical commentary, a satire on left-wing intellectuals: “what comes through is a deep antipathy to the *New Statesman* intellectual with his automatic contempt for the slow, devious logic of the English popular mind, his opportunism which proceeds by “contacts”, and his glossy internationalism, which makes him feel that his fate is not really bound up with England’s”. (Wain, 172) And Larkin, to a greater or lesser extent, endorses this more comforting reading: “Certainly it was a dig at the middleman who gives a lot of talks in America and then brushes them up and does them on the Third and then brushes them up again and puts them out as a book with Chatto”. (*Further Requirements*, 25) Wain also attempted to defend the poem against what was perceived to be its anti-nationalism, and asserted that Larkin “identifies with the puzzled, mournful crowds” which he sees as “trying in an inarticulate fashion to show that, while they cannot comprehend the earthquake that

³ See “Four Conversations”, *London Magazine*, n.s. 4.6 (November 1964), 76 (Larkin is interviewed by Ian Hamilton). This is reprinted in *Further Requirements*, 25.

was the First World War, they still wish to show some feeling about the men who died in it". The problem with this reading is that the "crowds" in the poem are passive – though probably misdescribed, because the Armistice Day celebrants usually wear colourful regimental uniforms and medals. Terry Whalen sees them as "victimized ordinary humanity" but it is hard to see this either. He continues, "there is something very positive in the memorial service which the poet wishes to value. The service is a ritual community event which brings into organic being a community's set of serious thoughts about death and humanity. Traditional life, in an odd way, survives in the service, corny as the superior-minded speaker might find it" (Whalen, p.80) This is a very discerning description of the ceremony itself, but, again, it is hard to find evidence for this reading of it in the poem. Larkin, in any case, had defended the narrator of the poem in his view of the crowds: "Why he should be blamed for not sympathizing with the crowds on Armistice Day, I don't know". (*Further Requirements*, 25)

III

Linear readings of this poem have largely concerned themselves with how far the "I" speaker of the poem is to be identified with the poet, with social attitudes and with political stances – and all these are valid questions which the poem raises. But, to return to the perfect pedagogue William de Baskeville, it seems to me in relation to this poem, "to know what one book says you must read others" This poem is richly intertextual, and larger more complex meanings are released if one attends to this aspect of it. The texts in question are a novel, the Bible, and two English hymns.

The mention of "Morgan", that is, E.M. Forster, in connection with India irresistibly recalls his great novel *A Passage to India* (1924), his corrosively satirical attack on the British colonial presence in the sub-continent. The mention of "Professor Lal" recalls Dr Panna Lal, a character in the novel, who appears most prominently in Chapter IX, a discussion at the bedside of the slightly ill Dr Aziz, which involves Hindus, Muslims and Fielding, an English teacher, and touches on subjects like colonialism and religion.⁴ Traditionally, at the Armistice Day ceremony, representatives of the colonies (now the Commonwealth) lay wreaths, so Britain's colonial past is being recalled in several ways in the poem, as the speaker goes to India, in 1961 a free sovereign state on new terms – which he would probably see as more "grow[n] up" than in the days when it was a colony. In the course of Chapter IX Fielding, like E.M. Forster a free thinking liberal, adverts, in the course of his conversation with the Hindus and the Muslims, to the decline of religion in the West and to his own lack of belief:

'The whole world looks to be dying, still it doesn't die, so we must assume the existence of a beneficent Providence.'

'Oh, that is true, how true!' said the policeman, thinking religion had been praised.

⁴ Larkin records with amusement, in his interview with Ian Hamilton, a reaction to this name, illustrating the way the poem has been misread: "The awful thing is that the other day I had a letter from somebody called Lal in Calcutta, enclosing two poetry books of his own and mentioning this poem. He was very nice about it, but I shall have to apologize." (*Further Requirements*, p. 25).

'Does Mr. Fielding think it's true?'
 'Think which true? The world isn't dying. I'm sure of that!'
 'No, no – the existence of Providence.'
 'Well, I don't believe in Providence.'
 'But how then can you believe in God?' asked Syed Mohammed.
 'I don't believe in God.'
 A tiny movement as of 'I told you so!' passed round the company, and Aziz looked up for an instant, scandalized.
 'Is it correct that most are atheists in England now?' Hamidullah enquired.
 'The educated thoughtful people? I should say so, though they don't like the name. The truth is that the West doesn't bother much over belief and disbelief in these days. Fifty years ago, or even when you and I were young, much more fuss was made'. (Forster, 95)

And the educated "I" of Larkin's poem is part of this twentieth-century drift away from religion in England, a common theme in his poetry. The Armistice Day commemoration has within it a religious service, presided over, as Larkin makes clear, by a "Minister", and in the speaker's impatient rejection of the ceremony is a rejection of this, its religious dimension.

But several religious texts interpenetrate the poem and, though none of them mean anything to the speaker in anything like their original terms, they provide a counterweighing value system to his own. The famous Pauline verse from I Corinthians 13:12 about the limits of human knowledge and the promise of illumination, "For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known", where "glass" means "mirror" lies behind: "Perceiving Chatto darkly / Through the mirror of the Third." The "I" speaker is seemingly oblivious to the spiritual dimension of the intertext – he does not recognize the limits of his human knowledge and the only way in which he will know and be known when he gets to India is purely social, when he recognizes and greets Professor Lal, his "contact".

Terry Whalen speaks about the "lilting nursery rhyme meter" of this poem, but he is mistaken. (Whalen, p.80) The eight-line stanza, either fully rhymed on alternating lines or rhymed on the even lines, is a common one in English hymns. And two specific hymns from *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861 and subsequently), the standard hymnal of the English Protestant church, leave important traces in the poem at the beginning and the end. No. 255, which is alluded to in the poem's title, begins:

The Church's one foundation
 Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
 She is his new creation
 By water and the word:
 From heaven he came and sought her
 To be his holy Bride;
 And with his Blood he bought her,
 And for her life he died.

The “foundation” of the church in this hymn is Jesus Christ who paid for the redemption of mankind with his blood and gave his life, and the “foundation” of the poem is belittled in comparison: all that it can do is pay for a trip by a careerist academic with his recycled lecture. No. 331 is even more important:

O Jesus, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
Be thou for ever near me,
My master and my friend:
I shall not fear the battle
If thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If thou wilt be my guide.

The phrase “My master and my friend” recurs at the end of the fourth stanza, and a variant on it “My saviour and my friend” closes off the hymn:

O let me see thy foot-marks,
And in them plant mine own;
My hope to follow duly
Is in thy strength alone:
O guide me, call me, draw me,
Uphold me to the end;
And then in heaven receive me,
My saviour and my friend.

These phrases, defining the relationship between the faithful Christian and Christ, are picked up in a diminished form by the final phrase of Larkin’s poem “My contact and my pal” – referring to the Indian academic who will “receive” the visiting “I” speaker.

This speaker, therefore, complains about the English establishment – the monarchy, the army, the church – and about the inconvenient “crowds” in one of their cherished forms. But his mundane discourse and his smug iconoclasm are destabilized and challenged by the intertexts which suggest value systems and issues different from his own. And in this regard it is worth looking closely at the word “dwindle” in the line “And dwindle off down Auster”. At one level it means “grow smaller as I go south”, taken from the point of view of those left in chilly London as his aeroplane gains height and crosses the Thames from London airport going south-east. But the word also appears in a poem of Auden’s, called “On the Circuit”, which Larkin liked enough to include in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*. In it a travelling lecturer, from his aeroplane, contemplates the town of his previous night’s audience:

Another morning comes: I see
Dwindling below me on the plane,
The roofs of one more audience
I shall not see again. (Auden, 63)

And in the next stanza he blesses the USA ‘so friendly, and so rich’ which provides no doubt for his livelihood, including his expenses. As James Booth points out, Larkin’s poem was written before Auden’s so the influence, if there is any, goes that way.⁵ But it is interesting to compare the two uses of the word “dwindle”: in Auden’s it refers to the receding view of the town as his aeroplane climbs; in Larkin’s it refers to the lecturer himself. He, self-confessedly, diminishes, and perhaps there is, in Larkin’s use of the word, the sense of “diminish” – which, in my reading of the poem, is what happens to the speaker as the poem develops.

When one reads a poem like this, as a critic or as an educator, it is all too easy to be distracted by biographical knowledge, or the *obiter dicta* of the poet. It is all too easy also, especially when the poem deals with contested issues such as colonialism, nationalism or religion, to make its understanding a question of attitude. Ostensibly, if one believes Larkin, and some of his friends such as John Wain, this is a poem in which the “shit” who is the “I” speaker of the poem and his attitudes are held up to ridicule through a pervasive irony – and that may be part of the truth. But the control of a poem sometimes escapes the poet, and critics, even those close to a writer, are capable of misreadings. And, it seems to me, Larkin’s own estimate of poems such as this, which are richly intertextual, is misleading:

Poems don’t come from other poems, they come from being oneself, in life. Every man is an island, entire of himself, as Donne said. This American idea – it is American isn’t it? Started with Pound and Eliot? – that somehow every new poem has to be the sum of all old poems, like the latest Ford, well, it’s the sort of idea lecturers get, if you’ll excuse my saying so. Makes sense and so on: only it’s not how poetry works. (*Further Requirements*, 54).⁶

Whether Larkin is being deliberately mischievous here in showing his contempt for quotations or whether he is seriously ill-informed (which is hard to believe), I do not know, but he totally reverses Donne’s famous statement, that “No man is an Island intire of itself...” (Donne, 126) Some poems do indeed work intertextually, including, as I have tried to show, this poem. And there is nothing arcane in the particular allusions. Larkin clearly knew E.M. Forster’s novel and the biblical text from I Corinthians 13:12, and he is likely to have sung the two hymns he uses when he was a pupil at King Henry VIII’s School, Coventry, just as I sang them at what was then King Edward VI Grammar School, Nuneaton, about eight miles away – they are standard, often used hymns. D.H. Lawrence’s recommendation may be apposite here: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale”. Lawrence goes on to talk about it being the function of the critic to rescue the work of art from the artist. (Lawrence, Chapter 1, *passim*) And it is much the same for the lecturer or teacher. A linear reading of this poem reduces the critic’s choices and in the interests of understanding the poem this simplistic approach has to be resisted. If one recognizes the intertextuality

⁵ For an interesting comparison of the two poems and for Larkin’s engagement with “On the Circuit” see Booth, 30-31.

⁶ Larkin appears to be thinking of Eliot’s statement in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.” (Eliot, p. 49).

of this poem the “mosaic of quotations” makes the text polysemous and polyphonic. Though it has a single speaker who appears to represent a single point of view, there are many other voices in this poem: some have read serious books and some of them sing hymns. And because of the presence of these other voices, this is a much better, more humanly decent and capacious poem, than Larkin and apologists for him like John Wain are prepared to see. This is not one of Larkin’s greatest poems, but if ever a poem of his needed rescuing by critics or educators it is this one.

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sean m. conrey

A History of Naming

Maybe the words drew across the plains
like wind through wheat,
touched cold lakes thick with pollen
and heavy fog, flew past woodpiles,
past the chipped brick sides
of tall red homes sitting stoic
in the Midwest, then finally became
breath and foundered at the end

of a pen, driven out
through the body like sap in a cedar,
or a stop sign near the tracks,
out of necessity and safety,
words like houses, carved out
of the woods nearby into rows,
cut like granite or marble,
piled and shaped into spaces
big enough to inspire a silence
a playground full of children
couldn't fill, not even if
they all had garden hoses,
not even if the words were like

water itself, the nearly inaudible sound
of the river rubbing shore,
barges, brigantines and schooners,
docked on quays with stringlights
and piss streams and champagne
bottles broken on a sloop's bow,
as rose petals drift in the flotsam
from a torrent that struck upstream
at midnight, till the bodies bring
newsmen, flashbulbs and headlines
printed in ink by the gallon,
newsprint used for paper boats
set aflame and set afloat
in fire and smoke, words founded
the day we began, in lightning perhaps,
or a brushfire, words now tied to
tongues of flame deep in the boiler,
or the uranium atom controlled,
the unseen fire that kills without pause,
and then so many words for death.

A Prayer for Prometheus

Prometheus, can you please alight
these not yet ode-worthy things
with at least spray painted flames

like those on gas tanks of large
black Harleys that sound at night
like monster locusts raging?

It's in good faith I ask. You see,
earlier, the machinery turned
as I walked down Orchid Street.

All the weeds pushing against
the sidewalks licked the sunlight
straight from the air and I felt

you there, doling out the light.
Was it you who put the lanterns
in my eyes and spread the page

before me? You who stirs
embers in a censer making figures
pour from mathematicians' pens?

You who put the punk to the fuse
of the world so that I,
candle to candle, mind to mind,

would end up staring, startled
for words? If so, Prometheus,
I must say I'm finding all this fire

confusing. Could you instead
turn your torch on one thing at a time
so I could ease up to all this beauty?

dylan harris

the prevarication of flowers

1

no bigger than a dozen beer mats
i was seven
the soil
trying to seduce cromwell
a year to see the flowers grow
with scent absent scent
now i feel the enticement
had he gloried the moment
i'd have been court

2

standing into my space
close scent of delicious shape
maddening crowd of prevarication
the unbroken dance
had it ever been
i'd have been court

3

the prevarication of flowers
poetry & beer delivered
brutalist concrete

philip coleman

“the absolute dust of the language”: reading george szirtes

George Szirtes, *New & Collected Poems* (Bloodaxe, 2008), 520 pp, £15

George Szirtes, *The Burning of the Books and Other Poems* (2009), 102 pp, £8.95

John Sears, *Reading George Szirtes* (Bloodaxe, 2008), 248 pp, £12

In his translation of one of the sections of her poem *Journal* included in Ágnes Nemes Nagy's *The Night of Akhenaton: Selected Poems* (2004), George Szirtes writes: “You sit and read. How alone you are, even you don't know.” Nemes Nagy's *Journal* is a work of intense philosophical self-examination that poses difficult questions about the relationship between reality and thought: “I know I have no reasonable grounds / for thinking,” she writes in another section entitled “Mind,” “but watch the thoughts as they go round.” Szirtes has said that Nemes Nagy's “mystical, surreal, intellectual dislocations are [...] an attempt to discover [...] the principle that holds things together.” Her poems, subsequently, often appear to dramatise the figure of the poet thinking, leading to the kind of self-doubt that cuts the speakers of her poems off from the realities they describe, revealing a breach at the heart of lyric performance that marks Nemes Nagy out as one of the most important poets not just in twentieth-century Hungarian literature but in the broader international story of Modernist poetry. As she puts it in the opening quatrain of her poem “Snow”:

This downpouring of silence, I
don't even know if I'm hearing it,
this hardly-there snow-pallor, I
don't even know if I'm seeing it

The speaker speaks to a reality that appears to disappear from her apprehension at the very moment that she apprehends it. As she writes elsewhere: “This I have seen (This I have never seen) / Here I have been (Here I have never been)”.

These lines and phrases from Nemes Nagy – from George Szirtes's Nemes Nagy – are important not only because they allow readers who do not understand Hungarian to gain access to the work of this important poet, but also because they provide an interesting and useful key to understanding one of the central aspects of Szirtes's project as a writer, a project that is given comprehensive exposure in his *New & Collected Poems*. For Szirtes is a poet for whom the process of making poems is a function of the way in which he reads and re-reads the world around him, as it was for Wallace Stevens, whose poem “God Is Good. It Is a Beautiful Night” provides the epigraph for this volume. Annoyingly, the period in Stevens's title is replaced with a comma in Szirtes's book, and the line “Look round you as you start, brown moon,” should read “Look round you as you start to rise, brown moon,” but the signpost to Stevens at the outset of Szirtes's *New & Collected Poems* points not just to Anglo-American poetic modernism but to a kind of twentieth-century poetry and poetics that is – like Nemes Nagy's – fundamentally concerned with questions of epistemology. How does the self know the world and how might a poem be written in which the process of knowing the world can be articulated? These questions are central to the

work of Stevens, but where he has often been accused of obscuring the worldly in his work – “That metaphysics / he hefted up until we could not breathe / the physics” as John Berryman put it – in Szirtes’s work the process of world-questioning leads successfully to the creation of poems that are remarkably proximate to the realities that they attempt to engage. So there is in his poetry a philosophical accent and attitude that is reminiscent of poets like Stevens, but Szirtes is also a poet for whom what he calls “reality-sense and historical-sense” are always acutely present.

Szirtes uses these terms in a valuable “Preface” to his *New & Collected Poems* where he writes:

When, at seventeen, I set out to write I just wanted to be a poet. First stage. Then, as I went on, I began to feel I had to be specifically an English poet, meaning one who worked from within the language as spoken by those around me. Second stage leading to the first book. But then, in the course of my first three books [...] I found myself moving towards something I seem to have desired ever more urgently without quite knowing it. What was it? The easy answer would be “identity,” but it was not so much my personal or cultural identity I wanted to discover – I was then, and remain, sceptical about any notion of identity that has a fixed locatable centre – as, what I’d call now, an amalgam of reality-sense and historical-sense. The desire was blind and unarticulated but acute.

That “desire” sent Szirtes back to Hungary, where he was born in 1948, as he goes on to explain:

The desire drove me to a first return visit to Hungary in 1984 as a result of which I found myself becoming an English poet with a Hungarian past, or, to be more accurate, a fully baptised but increasingly residual-Christian (to use Peter Porter’s term) English poet with a Jewish Hungarian past. This becoming was not a project, more a kind of falling into what now appears inevitable, into that which has been the rest of my life. What was it I fell into? Buildings and streets and bullet holes in walls, the world of the missing and a clutch of dead relatives, not to mention the long-buried, not-quite-forgotten, shadow language that I began to speak again and from which I started to translate.

Given this account it is astonishing to consider how much work Szirtes has done as a translator of Hungarian literature over the past twenty-five years or so. In addition to undertaking the task of translating Nemes Nagy and other major twentieth-century Hungarian poets (such as Dezső Kosztolányi, for example, and Zsuzsa Rakovszky) he has also been a key promoter of Hungarian prose fiction, translating and publishing popular texts such as Gyula Krúdy’s *Adventures of Sinbad* and Ferenc Molnár’s *Paul Street Boys* (the latter a revised version of Louis Rittenberg’s earlier edition). He is also the editor or co-editor of several influential anthologies, most notably *The Colonnade of Teeth: Modern Hungarian Poetry* (1996) and *An Island of Sound: Hungarian Poetry and Fiction before and beyond the Iron Curtain* (2004). All of this in addition to producing more than a dozen or more individual collections of poems in English (chapbooks as well as volumes with Oxford University Press and later

Bloodaxe), cassette and CD recordings with Michael Donaghy, Anne Stevenson, and others, and collaborations with various artists that have involved installations or exhibitions in galleries including the Barbican Art Gallery and Tate Modern in London.

Szirtes's return visit to Hungary in 1984, in other words, marked the beginning of a process of cultural immersion that played a major role in the development of his career, and it is no surprise that his poems – for all of their independence as poems quite separate from Szirtes's other activities – reflect this. From collections such as *The Photographer in Winter* (1986), with its remarkable sequence of “Budapest Postcards” to *Portrait of my Father in an English Landscape* (1998), *The Budapest File* (2000), through to “Flesh: an Early Family History” in *Reel* (2004), Budapest, Hungary, and the author's Hungarian background are Szirtes's foremost sources of inspiration. The final poem in *New & Collected Poems*, indeed, conjures an image of a space in a building in Budapest that could be read as a metaphor for the vast edifice that is Szirtes's poetry, a distinctly Hungarian space in which “Light dances / all by itself as if the building were untenanted.” The poems gathered together in this volume constitute a reconstruction of the “[b]uildings and streets and bullet holes in walls, the world of the missing and a clutch of dead relatives,” that Szirtes says he was driven back to in 1984. As such, this volume not only represents the gathering together between two covers of poems written over a number of decades by a poet of distinctive cultural and artistic significance, but the book can also be read as a major act of historical recovery and reclamation, a work in which “the courtyards of the ordinary” are brought into clear focus.

Reading Szirtes, then, is to read – or to learn to read – the spaces out of which modern (i.e. twentieth-century) Hungarian literature and culture have emerged. His work as a translator from Hungarian extends over and into his work as a poet in English because even there it is evident that one of his chief preoccupations is how to make sense of the cultural and social background from which he was cut off when he was brought to England as an eight-year-old refugee in 1956. While it is easy to understand the importance of the 1980s in his description of his re-engagement with Hungarian culture, moreover, it is possible to read the effects of Szirtes's early severance from his first home in his earliest poems, including pieces published in Faber and Faber's *Poetry Introduction 4* (1978) for example, in poems such as “The Drowned Girl”, where he describes a figure “[m]eaning more dead than she did alive” who, it is claimed, has the capacity

To instruct my children
In the grammar of countries
Vaster, more important than theirs,

Yet with which they shall in time
Be themselves acquainted [...].

“The Drowned Girl” is a poem about language and the perseverance of the voice of poetry in the face of historical violence. While it is the case, then, that “[p]aintings, photographs and films have haunted” Szirtes's poems, as he admits in the “Preface” to *New & Collected Poems*, his work is also pervaded by the presence of Hungarian

cultural and historical experience more generally, and especially in terms of events that happened there over the course of the second half of the twentieth century.

It is unfortunate that more could not have been done in the production of *New & Collected Poems* to make Szirtes's engagements with the visual arts more apparent – these engagements are signalled in the “Preface” but the reader is left wondering about their significance in the absence of clear illustrations. (Something like the reproduction of frontispiece illustrations to individual collections in Robert Lowell's *Collected Poems*, for example, might have been possible here.) To talk of Szirtes in the larger cultural terms used above, more importantly, is of little use without the kind of forensic attention to detail that only a study such as John Sears's *Reading George Szirtes* can accomplish. Sears's book is one of the best of its kind in terms of its handling of contextual and textual material – patiently unpacking the poems with due regard to statements by the author himself and other commentators in chapters that chart the development of his work up to and including the new work in *New & Collected Poems*. It is revealing, however, that the publication of *New & Collected Poems* in 2008 was followed almost immediately by *The Burning of the Books and Other Poems* in 2009. This most recent book seems to comment on the very activities of cultural and historical “reading” out of which Szirtes's work as a whole – as it is represented in *New & Collected Poems* – may be said to have evolved. Here, in a poem called “Lead White,” the poet writes: “Once I loved the poetry of words / but now it is the poetry of the intractable / that moves me”, but in a sense Szirtes has always been a poet of both spheres, moving between the apparent linguistic intractability and strangeness of the Hungarian language and a series of cultural and social realities and circumstances that may in an important sense be forever beyond aesthetic containment or control. “The Burning of the Books” itself is a remarkable exploration of the ways in which literature shapes and is shaped by reality, but it is also a poem in which serious questions are asked about the relationship between writing and publication, reputation and different kinds of interpretative authority:

Librarian of the universal library, have you explored
The shelves in the stockroom where the snipers are sitting,
The repository of landmines in the parking bay,
The suspicious white powder at the check-out desk,
The mysterious rays bombarding you by the photocopier,
The psychological disorder of the filing system
That governs the paranoid republic of print
In the wastes of the world?

Only a poet who has thought long and hard about his own status as a writer and of the connection between his writing and his reading of other writers, as well as the broader cultural and historical contexts within which literature may be said to work, can ask a question like this.

The Burning of the Books and Other Poems, therefore, while it is a separate work (or collection of works) in its own right, might also be read as a crucial coda to Szirtes's *New & Collected Poems*. It demonstrates the author's ongoing concern with questions to do with poetry's form but also its function – not just how it might be

written but why, and what might be gained from doing so. In his review of *New & Collected Poems* for *Poetry Ireland Review* Peter Denman understandably reiterated the description of Szirtes's poetry as "remarkably English," while acknowledging "his transnational outreach to Hungary." Szirtes's "outreach to Hungary", however, has over the past few decades enabled him to write a poetry that actually extends beyond his Hungarian and his English (and occasionally Irish) contexts, a poetry that attains the kind of internationalism that has been praised in figures as diverse as Czesław Miłosz and Octavio Paz. His work has all of the formal dexterity and political urgency of their writing, while at the same time remaining true, at all stages, to language itself and the art of poetry, wherever it is read. Whether he is read in terms of his English or his Hungarian background – and he must be read with due regard to both of these contexts if he is to be understood at all – Szirtes's work leads readers to consider the place beyond books, beyond "the paranoid republic of print" as he terms it. As Nemes Nagy was fond of saying, after Rilke, ultimately "we stand arrested at our borders and grab at things Nameless." Or, as Szirtes himself puts it:

Where books are gathered there gathers also the dust
That sieves through the pores of the skin and the head,
The absolute dust of the language that falls apart
In your hands, that settles in your palm
Like a promise.

marthine satris

“technically speaking”

Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings, ed. Kenneth Haynes. Oxford University Press, £34.00 (hbk), £18.99 (pbk). 816 pp.

Geoffrey Hill’s academic and poetic career has spanned the last half of the twentieth century, and this volume is a testament to a life of obsessive attention to detail and to his rejection of the mores of contemporary scholarship and postmodern life. Hill’s poetry is firmly formalist; even while his more recent poetry has found its shape in free verse, technical control and precision remain of primary importance. This holds for his evaluation of other writers as well. In *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings* (2008), his essays are presented in five divisions: three sections composed of previous collections and two sections that are collections envisioned but not previously published by Hill. The essays in this collection center on Hill’s speciality, poetry; in addition, a few focus on religious writings, a new edition of the Oxford English Dictionary and on the updating of spelling and vocabulary in new editions of the New Testament. Hill’s interest in religion and in correct usage of language are recurrent subjects in nearly every essay in this collection, no matter what the overarching topic.

In the decades of work contained in this volume, Hill explains poetry’s relevance to life, how to evaluate and value poetry and how poets represent spirituality and their own humanity in language. These concerns return frequently throughout the essays, as do several favoured poets and intellectuals – Hopkins, Coleridge, Dryden, Donne and Pound, in particular. The essays therefore often read like reiterations of the same arguments in slightly different contexts. Hill’s beliefs are firm and unchanging as he argues for poets to combine ethics and technical rigour, for the importance of context and contingency, for his distinction between “pitch” and “tone” and for the need of a humility derived from belief in the Fall of Man. This does give the reader a clear idea of Hill’s interests and beliefs, but reading a volume of collected essays that elaborates on the same assertions over forty-odd years means that the conclusions of his digressive intellectual journeys become predictable.

The exacting standards of Hill’s criticism are matched by the careful presentation of his essays in this edition. The quality of editing in his book is consistent and excellent – the lengthy text is free of the typographical errors that pervade so many academic publications today, the index is extremely thorough and the physical quality of the book itself is high. However, the editorial or authorial intervention of an introduction that brought forward common themes and explained the different foci of each book within the collection would have helped orient the unfamiliar reader to Hill’s oeuvre. The scholarly apparatus of the book could also have used some more attention. The publication information and dates of all the essays are reserved for an editorial note that follows the text, rather than being available to the reader in the table of contents or as a footnote at the beginning of each essay, depriving the reader of context and chronological information for the texts.

In an even more bewildering move, and one that to this reviewer, reveals the confusion about who the audience is for this collection, the extensive and thorough endnotes are difficult to navigate, as there are no superscripts in the text itself to direct the reader to the correct note. Instead, the endnotes are listed after an abbreviation of the quoted material, and each page of endnotes covers several pages of the original text. In order to discover the source of a quotation or paraphrase, one has to guess whether or not it might be sourced from elsewhere, and then triangulate within the endnotes to discover where the information might lie. This lack of indication of sources in the text, combined with Hill's tendency to quote without attribution (excepting in the essays in the section titled "The Enemy's Country"), means that a reader is never sure whether or not Hill is referencing other texts, or if he is using quotation marks to indicate neologisms or just a specific usage. This presentation of the essays indicates a confusion about audience since academics, the original audience of most of these essays, would expect clear annotation, while the casual reader, who might be put off by the constant interruption of footnotes or endnotes, seems unlikely to need or want an 800-page tome on such topics as "Word Value in F.R. Bradley and T.S. Eliot" in which Latin, Greek and French are left untranslated in both the text and the notes. While these might seem to be minor irritations, they affect the usefulness of this collection as a resource and make one question the purpose of collecting these essays together if the added value of a strong editorial framework is not present.

That framework would have also been useful in delineating Geoffrey Hill's choices in regards to critical theory over the last forty years. Hill's embrace of the New Critical approach to analysing literature is in heavy evidence in his emphasis on paradox and double meanings, but he also contextualises the poetry he close-reads with clarifying turns to authors' letters, their prose, reception history and contemporary cultural and social contexts. This biographical and historical information breathes life into his close attention to the language itself, although we might still ask why he entirely rejects Structuralism as having a "deleterious effect" (363) and seems to have ignored all other contemporary innovations in critical theory. Additionally, to a twenty-first century academic audience, the style and structure of Hill's essays, especially the early essays initially collected in *The Lords of Limit*, seem quite alien. Hill rarely states his topic until halfway through his essays, if at all (see "Dryden's Prize Song" for an example of this approach), and he tends to move forward through essays by leaping from work to work rather than plotting out an argument, as in his essay "Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value." This is true throughout the decades of work collected, although there are some essays with clearer intentions than others.

The most engrossing of Hill's essays are the ones in which he is able to restrain his most vexing habits: his tendency to list all dictionary definitions for a word, for example, while dismissing other critics' language as "lumpish" (351). The essays that delighted me with their insight and showed Hill's excellent eye and his subtle understanding of language to their best advantage were "A Pharisee to Pharisees" from the collection *Style and Faith*, in which he focuses entirely on Henry Vaughan's use of rhyme in his religious poetry, and the two essays on First World War poets, "Gurney's 'Hobby'" and "Isaac Rosenberg, 1890-1918" from the section entitled "Inventions of Value." While many of his usual hobbyhorses do appear in

these essays, the essays themselves hold the reader's attention and seem to make an effort to convey a single, clear argument. In his essay on the updating of spelling in a new edition of William Tyndale's *New Testament*, Hill disdains the very word "accessible" as being code for "surrender[ing] without a qualm to 'the worlde of weake people'" (296), but in fact it is the accessibility of the above-named three essays that make them the most interesting and useful to his readers.

As mentioned previously, many of Hill's essays collected in this volume are organized by teasing out connections among multiple authors whose relationship to one another is very tenuous, as when in "Redeeming the Time" he claims a connection between nineteenth century civil unrest and the linguistic rhythms in contemporaneous poetry, prose and political pamphlets. One of the strengths of "A Pharisee to Pharisees" is that he only writes of a single poem by one author. His explication of the poem "The Night" by Henry Vaughan is masterful, learned and convincing. Hill draws out the significance of Vaughan's rhyming of "night" and "light" in this poem by invoking Biblical scholarship about John 3 (the chapter that provided the inspiration for Vaughan's poem), Vaughan's prose, and the presence of that same rhyme in other poets' work and in a score of Vaughan's other poems.

Hill's two essays on First World War poets Isaac Rosenberg and Ivor Gurney in the section "Inventions of Value" are important assessments of their overall work, the tension between the language of poetry and everyday usage and the contexts within which they wrote. This last, in particular, is a valuable contribution to our understanding of these poets. Hill considers the role of circumstance in shaping the poetry of Rosenberg and Gurney, but not the difficulties of war itself (to Hill, the influence of Confessionalism on poetry has had the debilitating effect of causing poems to be valued "merely [as] a kind of tictac or flyer" that is "evidence of a suffering life" [450]). Instead, the factors on which he focuses are the impact of the celebrity status of Rupert Brooke, the two subjects' working-class backgrounds and their status as enlisted men, Gurney's bitterness in his later life about the lack of acceptance and recognition by society and Rosenberg's pre-war acquaintance with a group of artistically minded Jewish British friends. In "Gurney's 'Hobby,'" Hill uses Gurney's own characterization of his writing as a hobby to discuss poetry's relation to society's valuation of art, and Hill then explains that he reads the loss of lyricism in Gurney's later work as reflective of his rejection of the most popular poetry of the day and also of his own rejection by society. In his consideration of Rosenberg's life and work, Hill makes the subtle distinction between valuing a poem because it is evidence of suffering and valuing it because it realizes "the interrelatedness of experience and language" (449). He argues that the best of Rosenberg's poems deploy language in ways that both recall and defy conventional use, but mourns that Rosenberg sometimes sacrifices technical perfection for what the poet perceived as better communication of his ideas. His evaluation of Rosenberg's poetry relies on New Critical values, as do Hill's judgements in general, as can be seen in his reference in the Rosenberg essay to the "power" of the "brief, concentrated lyric" (458) and to a poem as having a "total weight" (457) and "intrinsic value" (464).

Hill's evaluations and analyses of the poems in the essays mentioned above are specific and clear. Often, however, the validation for his conclusions needed further fleshing out to convince a sceptic. One example of this is in the essay "Eros in F.F. Bradley and T.S. Eliot," when he claims that "Bradley is never crass, Eliot is"

(558). This declarative statement is seemingly based on a quote from Eliot's 1928 "Preface" to *The Sacred Wood*. This is a passage few but Hill would consider crass, as Eliot explains in this passage that he defines poetry is a "superior" kind of amusement, a stance also taken by Virgil and Johnson, among others. Perhaps this proves Hill's exquisitely refined taste, but his assumption that he does not need to justify this taste means that he leaves those who come to this passage with a different opinion alienated and unconvinced.

Additionally, Hill's language often lacks specificity, as when Hill says that a line of Pound's Canto CXVI is "grammatically self serving and metrically glib" without explaining why exactly the rhythm of "To confess wrong without losing rightness" is read as glib or how the grammar of this line is "self-serving" (400). With so many lengthy arguments based on specific dictionary definitions present elsewhere in this volume, I would expect more precise explanations by the critic himself. This failure of specificity continues in his repeated efforts over multiple essays to differentiate between "pitch" and "tone" as qualities by which language can be evaluated. He uses accumulations of examples rather than contriving specific definitions, and the examples he gives are also arguably ones that could be said to create a tone (see the list of phrases from Emerson on page 498 that are said to create a not a *tone* but a *pitch* that is a "bleak" "vision" [499]). Hill's goals for his criticism are lofty, and he would be the first to admit that human striving to meet philosophical and linguistic challenges often leads to further revelations of our own flaws.

Geoffrey Hill's collected work is not meant to revolutionize critical discourse – the concerns he raises about value, about humanity and about the ethical use of language are ones that have long been under debate. The purpose they might best serve is of framing the choices of Hill makes in his own poetry. Reading all of Hill's collected critical writing will heighten one's attention to style in both critical and poetic language, which he would certainly be gratified to know. However, Hill's judgements and explanations often need more context and explanation to make sense to non-expert readers – and as many of the individual papers cover multiple authors and topics, with the whole volume embracing writers from the sixteenth through twentieth centuries, one would not expect any reader who is not Hill himself to be an expert in all these topics. This volume will be most useful to those who share Hill's Anglican point of view and are interested in arguments about religion and ethics in poetry. The essays should also be read, in moderation, by those who enjoy a finely-tuned close-reading placed carefully in cultural context.

reviews

Brendan Kennelly. *Reservoir Voices*. Bloodaxe. 96pp. £8.95 (pb)

“He is the people’s poet,” declares the jacket of Brendan Kennelly’s latest collection, *Reservoir Voices*. Kennelly might well blush at this praise in its evocation of Tony Blair’s posthumous sobriquet for Diana Spencer, but it is true to say that Brendan Kennelly has long been regarded as one of Ireland’s most popular writers, alongside county-mate John B. Keane. This collection will cement that popularity.

Kennelly is at home in the personal lyric. But his tactic is often one of seeming impersonation, as it is here, rather than of self revelation. In *Reservoir Voices*, he aims to personify; he voices feelings, inanimate objects, behaviours. Thus we have poems like “Shame”, the first in the book, “Thighs”, “Pen”, (inevitably) “Paper” and, the last poem in the book, “Peace”. The following excerpt from “Crossword” gives the flavour of the book.

He attacks me every morning.
His friends say I keep him sane.
He stops raging and fuming

and keeps on thinking and choosing
until all my small squares are filled.

This personification is despite the book’s genesis in the life of the man – we are informed in the preface that the book took shape following a “surrender to loneliness” during a semester spent teaching in Boston. In the preface, Kennelly describes sitting looking out into reservoir near Boston college in a “state of fascinated dislocation.” It was then, we are told, in that time “of almost mesmerised emptiness, that the voices came.”

The voices speak in mostly three-line stanzas, inconsistently rhymed, of varying lengths and patterns. Kennelly is comfortable in this form and the flexibility of his approach allows him to indulge the voices. So, “Crossword” can conclude:

He stands there, looking at me,

calm now, pacified by words.
Time for a cigarette. He steps
outside the front door, puffing in the sun

inhaling the redemptive feeling
of something
well done.

In truth, though, the poems wear their form lightly, and one could imagine many of them formed in other ways without significant loss. It is perhaps the looseness of the poems' organisation and the writer's comfort with the form that leads him into cliché. The banality of "Listening", for instance, is regrettable – here's stanza 3:

listening is an art
some folks close their eyes
opening up their hearts
to separate truth from lies

The book has many such moments: "Flesh" ("I am your joy, your pain, the bearer/of burdens that never go away") and "War" ("I'm a glutton. For what? For the bodies/of fit young men") are examples.

The voice in "Poem" says:

Most of the time I sing what you'd have me sing
say what you'd have me say,
but now and then I go wandering
up the hill of shadows, astray

until I find the orphan I first met
sixty years ago.

Some of the other poems here meditate on this theme, like "Pen": "do we really understand/if you're using me/or I'm using you?" Kennelly is in more interesting territory here, the insecurity of the lines above contrasting with Heaney's determined "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests./I'll dig with it" or his "I rhyme/To see myself". The notion that the writer quiets himself to hear voices is entirely predictable – this is a considerable weakness of Kennelly's book. But, where *Reservoir Voices* succeeds is in positioning the individual as drowned out by voices – none of them his own – and alone in a world where one is assailed by other people, by behaviours and preferences and hates, by objects and feelings. In other words, the book makes a virtue of its limitation; it makes space for the individual by denying the individual a voice.

It is Mahon, not Heaney, one is reminded of many times here, not surprisingly. Several poems evoke "A Disused Shed in County Wexford" – for instance, "Forgotten":

We are the nobodies of humanity.

Take the smallest village or
the biggest city, we were there
once, like all others.

More interestingly, the barb in Mahon's "Heraclitus on Rivers" contained in the direct address to the poet (and the reader) is also visible in the "you" of Kennelly's poems. Mahon writes:

Your best poem, you know the one I mean,
The very language in which the poem
Was written, and the idea of language,
All these things will pass away in time.

It is clear that Kennelly is not a transmitter of voices; in the way of the voice in "Heraclitus on Rivers", Kennelly's voices are directed at himself.

It is noteworthy that *Reservoir Voices* contains many epigrammatic poems, somewhat out of kilter with the body of the book itself and perhaps meriting a different volume. "One line only", for instance, does not sit easily with the other poems here:

I am one line only
but according to a witty lady
I am the most
impressive of all:

"The cheque is in the post."

"Football", too, is good fun: "nobody on earth/enjoys being kicked around/like I do." These kinds of poems one can imagine lighting up a reading on a dull, wet evening in a dingy hall. However, the strategy at work in the larger collection is more interesting and deserving of attention. While the voices often speak in clichés and many times have little to say, it is the implied figure, the shadowy and lonely "you" in many of the poems, whose presence is memorable.

RICHARD HAYES

Giles Goodland. *What the Things Sang*. Shearsman. 112pp. £8.95 / \$15 (pb)
Dylan Harris. *antwerp*. Wurm Press. 72pp. €12 (pb)

*The metaphor is much wiser than its author, as are many things.
Everything has its depths. He who has eyes sees all in all.*
Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799)

Dylan Harris and Giles Goodland both demonstrate an extremely sophisticated handling of polysemy. They manipulate and generate it by way of a variety of post-avant experimental procedures, laying open for our intuition and critical contemplation some aspects of the “depths” of language and “its author”.

“Folk songs are the cries of dead labourers”, writes Goodland in *What the Things Sang*. Diachrony is one aspect of polysemy; multivalence is the evidential residue of history. Again and again in *antwerp* and *What the Things Sang* words are revealed as objects with an objective history entirely independent of any of their particular and localised iterations. A word is a singing artefact, a metamorphic vehicle of meaningful memory that is shaped, as well as fuelled, by the frictionous movement of the sign through human history, a history which has not ended, but may be about to, and surely will sometime, long before words do.

Biosemiotics teaches us that human language is just one contingent sign system occurring at a point in the long history of semiosis that stretches back to beginnings of cellular life. Language precedes, surrounds, and survives us, and Us. Human language is different in degree, but not in kind, to the signalling systems of all other plants and animals on our planet. *Language speaks us*, says Heidegger. “Language speaks for yourself”, writes Goodland. We are dummies, language itself the great ventriloquist. It has “depths” which are beyond normal needs and experience, but which poetry, at its best as in Harris and Goodland, can at least make visible and, provisionally, wanderable.

Both Harris and Goodland are, I believe, visionary, apocalyptic, synthesising writers, who try to see and to represent the “all in all”. However, they are visionaries in a thoroughly contemporary, post-prophetic sense. Their revelation is not based on either a mythopoetic teleology, as was Blake’s, who Goodland calls on, or on a belief in a political coming-to-be of a clearly defined new order, such as that prophesied from the left by Marx and Engels, to whom Harris makes gentle but effective parodical reference. Theirs is a non-deterministic, conditional, speculative envisioning. Not prophecy, but speculation is their shared mode, active speculation based on a polymathic understanding and multifaceted deployment of a nexus of fields of inquiry which contribute to describing and comprehending the crisis of contemporary life.

This ever deepening crisis has at its core two overlapping but not identical questions. The first is of the prospects for the survival of human life in general. The second is of the survival of the individual human subject as a particular and differentiated form of being within, but not subsumed, by that generality. Poems like “final tv big” and “balance still accelerando” in *antwerp* are, in part, depictions of a post-subjective Humanity in which all individual lives are lived in accord with the established Code. By, in Goodland’s phrase, “inventing differences”, the poet defends and expands the remaining subjective ground. The poet can be a militant

subject, a dummy putting words in the ventriloquist's mouth, smashing and reordering The Code, projecting a radically independent selfhood, making language speak of and for the creative uniqueness of the self, prefiguring a liberating reversal of the terms of the relationship between the self and the repressive structures (all of which order and are ordered through the pan-structure of language) into which it is thrown.

Just as words can diachronically reveal the manifoldedness of where they, and we, have come from, perhaps they can also, subjected to experimental derangement, enable us to speculate, suggestively, tentatively, indefinitely upon some of the possible future worlds, human and post-human, that are on their way to language. Harris and Goodland both, in their own way, point us in the direction of asking ourselves what it is language is saying and what it is going to say with us, where is the human sentence headed, when and how is it likely to end and what new signers and system will supersede and transcend it: *a poem forms the kind of pattern historians dream / we slow down history just so you can listen (What the Things Sang, 15)*

The apocalyptic end of human history will not mean the end of language, just the abandonment of its human host for some superior one more adaptable to the new conditions, the new becoming. Poetry – if and when it rises from its humanistic slumber – remains valourised in this inhuman telos – the poet never a master but perhaps the best apprentice, or adept, or accomplice of language, writing in a synthetic metatongue, a language of languages, that imprints more completely than any other available form of expression the complex experience of Being here now for us: “the best history we make for the robots”. (*What the Things Sang, 102*)

Generally speaking Goodland best complicates words diachronically, Harris synchronically; both do so by ambivalent or otherwise complex placing, thereby disrupting and interrogating the reading process, alerting the engaged reader to multiple roots, vectors and possible onward trajectories.

Harris's work encodes his euro-urban nomadry, morphing from city to city and scene to scene like jumpy interrail on benzedrine. Like the modern city his poems ceaselessly amalgamate, intersect and overlay. Like the modern city they never settle down into a clean or mappable (i.e reducible, translatable, conquerable) whole. Sometimes the numerous voices, languages, desires and forces at work in the poems are in close and complementary dialogue, sometimes they approach symbiosis and seem somehow embryonic, sometimes they exist alongside each other in complete mutual ignorance or disdain.

A favourite of mine is “tension nitro ego” in which the shouting monologic CAPS of a domestic argument – which seems to concern someone being stoutly criticised for their (typical male?) untidiness – interlayer with a (typically well-managed) streaming consciousness fretting about the ‘new earth’. It is not that the two apparently contradictory word-worlds do not belong together; they obviously quite plausibly do. In fact placing them alongside each other magnifies our understanding how two world's can live in close proximity, yet not meet, or only do so disharmonically. The city, we remember, in bringing so many together, engineers vast new distances between us, on every level from the blood up.

Harris's nitric stream meanders from its Deleuzian spring on through references to Messaien, Wittgenstein, and P-Branes, upturning phrases like

“supersymmetric part-life” and “gender mix strategy” in the flow, phrases which seem to me to be poised somewhere strategic between nonsense and prophecy. This is the equivocal semantic space, intriguing, endlessly generative, that Harris often occupies. Ellipsis and parataxis strip away the genetically inherited narrative tissue until we are left with a kind of supercharged minimalism which we must make of what we will and can. The lines totter out there on the edge of absurdism’s meaningless void, and then rebound with massive impact, space-time debris spun at light speed out of an Event Horizon.

A word is a kind of plant growing out of several grounds at once. Words also have the self-regenerative qualities of certain mythical beasts. As soon as a word loses one meaning, up sprouts another. Thanks to poets and dictionaries the old, outmoded meanings are never quite forgotten, never quite fade from view. They cling to the underbelly of the sign revenantly, as Odysseus clung to the sheep, awaiting relaunching into the open seas of language aboard a poem. On page 13 (there are no titles in *What The Things Sang* and to refer to these texts by first lines would seem to me a betrayal of a poetry which structures against any form of infratextual hierarchy and, in polemical contradiction to lyric narrative, requires that we pay equal attention to each word and line, pushing all to the furthest limits of expressive possibility) we find the word list employed thus in successive lines: “Corrections are listed in the Hedgerow / The moon shows me a list of the moon” Considering these lines in the light, or the shade, of the multiple meanings of list, (lean, desire, a scene of a combat...), suggests numerous semantic possibilities. As with J.H. Prynne and other leading avant-gardists, much of Goodland’s and Harris’s poetry also cross-complicates vocabularies gleaned from many sources beyond the conventional borders of the poetic, computer languages, critical theory, politics, philosophy, science fiction and cybernerd lingo, and so on. Harris gives us French and German too, as well as Anglo-Flemish macaronic (“ierland is geen belgie”). The effect, as with the best kinds of visual art or filmic collage, is not the stumped irritation sometimes effected by so-called aesthetic “difficulty”, but liberated intrigue, intellectual fascination. One cannot tear oneself away from *looking* at the poems, because there are always new connections to be made between their primally and radically promiscuous elements, always new understandings labouring to be born.

With many of Harris’s and Goodland’s lines we find ourselves as if we are in an interdimensional zoo looking at an creature which is somehow simultaneously a dog, a duck, a tyrannosaurus, a whale, a feather, an egg, and a mountain. However, no summary or imaging, no matter how outlandishly evocative, can quite capture the uncanny hybridity of Goodland and Harris, who, in order to be appreciated, must be read and reread with the total commitment to poetry their work displays and inspires.

DAVE LORDAN

Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910*. Oxford University Press. 752pp. (hb) £41.

We tend to think of epics as isolated happenings, enormously cataclysmic events that arrest history even as they report dynamically upon it. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are often talked about as if they represent two entirely different worlds, one humanist-materialistic and the other as pure legend; this is apt enough, since an epic is a story of which the events detail the creation of a world, simultaneously justifying that world's values. Such epic stories are usually seen as self-sufficient, and are rarely put into the context of larger tales; Herbert F. Tucker's *Epic* attempts to compensate for this lack. Tucker's book is grandiosely ambitious, having taken twenty years to complete, and as such is an epic achievement in its own right. He shows how the epics produced by romantic and post-romantic British poets exist in a continuity, one which obviously draws much of its authority from the De Mille-like dimensions of the narrative of the British Empire.

What cannot be quite left behind is that, *Don Juan* and *The Prelude* apart, none of the poems discussed by Tucker are likely to be ever read again. Even *Maud* will probably struggle for much attention in the years to come, and as such, Tucker's other tale, a sadder but wiser one, is of the withering of our collective attention span, and our waning appetite for epic poetry. Reading this book is a very guilty pleasure, therefore, as we have to acknowledge that Tucker has written the book that can take the place of us ever having to read Southey's *Roderick*, *the Last of the Goths* or Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*. Like a Cathar pure-of-heart, compensating for our lapsedness, Tucker exhibits a desire and appetite for his subject that we inevitably struggle to share.

Given this heroic labour on Tucker's part, it is not incredible that a certain self-congratulation creeps into his enterprise; but we should appreciate his very hard labour, as this is valuable and robust scholarship that is guaranteed to endure, not least because nobody else will essay this for a long time. Tucker's confidence about what those who avoid epic are missing is impressive. He describes a mode of carnival, of plurality and possibility:

Even where an upstart contender for generic supremacy did not engrossingly concern a given poet, the older genre still had to eat in order to live; and the meal that epic made of pastoral, georgic, ode, ballad, soliloquy, epigram, oratory, epistle *et cetera* was a standing narratological demonstration of its definitive roominess—a generic amplitude from which poetry's shuffling preference today for the nondescript “long poem” seems a regrettable declension into one thin dimension.

Where does this plurality come from? According to Tucker, it is the *Zeitgeist*'s fault. Epics are written by poets, but are authored by ideologies, civilizations and cultures (proving that there is no real distinction between any of these things). In some respects, then, the remarkable era of epic production described by Tucker is explicable by its being a time of incredible cultural realization, one when the age you were living in was more important than the body or head you were living in (which might explain the deficiencies of contemporary poets, epic-wise). None of his poets were seeking to be British Homers, rather they wanted to be as exaggerated and grandiose as the Empire itself. Tucker writes of an “irresistible narrative impulse within the psychologies of these poets,” yet such irresistibility

might also be seen as a form of power-madness, and this explains why so much of this epic poetry is unmemorable and unremarkable, even as there is indeed an incredible abundance of it. Invocations of the muse appeared too often as surrenders of responsibility, or as simple trippings of the switch so that the epic machine could go about its business. Tucker's shrewd judgements about the badness of much of this poetry substantiate the claims for greatness that he makes for a select few. He has earned a kind of canonical vision with this book, taking a quarter of a lifetime about its making, acquiring a tremendous authority in the process. Future critics of the epic poetry of this period will inevitably acknowledge the scale and vitality of Tucker's work, which is as good as it can get for any literary historian. Now he can read epics for fun.

MICHAEL HINDS

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