

## Five ways to access Poetry

For if we are not simply to 'stay our eye' on the glassy surface of a first and literal meaning, then we have to learn to read in a new and richer way. Though it is not really a new way, but rather a return to that fuller and more holistic way of reading which was taken from us at the enlightenment. This new or recovered way of reading will include at least some of the following elements:

### ***Tasting the Words:***

Firstly we need to recover slowness, and savouring and celebration of the text itself, of the surface and shape and appearance of the words, and most of all a savouring and celebration, a tasting in the mouth of their sounds. Sometimes the very music of the words compels this:

...In some melodious plot

Of beechen green and shadows numberless,

Singest of summer in full-throated ease<sup>1</sup>

When you read lines like that you simply have to speak them aloud or murmur them at least. Keats was perhaps the greatest master of the music inherent in the English language but all great poetry has it to some degree. And when, in response, we begin to slow down, not to rush the text, then we are beginning to enter into the old way of reading which once went by the name of *Lectio Divina*. The great practitioners and preservers of this art, as of so many other vital arts, were the monks of Europe. They showed it visually in their illuminated manuscripts, and aurally in this practice of *Lectio Divina*, the prayerful form of reading aloud. The Benedictine historian Jean Leclercq describes it in this way:

'To meditate is to attach oneself closely to the sentence being recited and weigh all its words in order to sound the depths of their full meaning. It means assimilating the content of a

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<sup>1</sup> 'Ode to a Nightingale' line 6-10 in *The Poetical works of John Keats* ed. HW Garrod (Oxford 1939) p.257  
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text by means of a kind of mastication which releases its full flavour. It means, as St. Augustine, St. Gregory, John of Fecamp and others say in an untranslatable expression, to taste it with the *palatum cordis* or in *ore cordis*. All this activity is necessarily a prayer; the *lectio divina* is a prayerful reading. Thus the Cistercian, Arnoul of Boheriss will give this advice:

When he reads, let him seek for savour, not science. The Holy Scripture is the well of Jacob from which the waters are drawn which will be poured out later in prayer. Thus there will be no need to go to the oratory to begin to pray; but in reading itself, means will be found for prayer and contemplation.<sup>2</sup>

For the English Church echoes of this ancient art of reading are preserved in the Prayer Book collect on the scriptures with its petition ‘...Help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them...’<sup>3</sup>

We should also come to poetry both for that inner nourishment, and, in that beautiful Cistercian image, for waters drawn up from a well, to be poured out fruitfully later.

### ***Echo and Counterpoint:***

The first fruit of this slower savouring of the text will be a new openness to the powers of echo and counterpoint, of the tension between the words themselves, and the way the words of a poem speak to each other across the lines. There are powers of cross-reference and connection inherent in each word and through the words, in the images they evoke. We saw this for example in the way some of the phrases in *Prayer* connect with and re-enforce each other whilst others react against one another modelling the tensions which are actually inherent in a life of prayer. Words are not dry little counters each betokening one meaning. Even the smallest and driest of words is like the small dry seeds that fall through Heaney's *Rain Stick*, suddenly evoking through their music all the refreshing downpour he celebrates. We have to let the words be music, and in

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<sup>2</sup>Jean LeClercq OSB *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, (London SPCK 1978) p.90

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent  
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that music to let them play counter-melodies to one another. This is happening all the time in even the most familiar and apparently simple poetry. Take for example Blake's 'Tiger'<sup>4</sup>.

Tiger! Tiger! Burning bright

In the forests of the night,

What immortal hand or eye

Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

The first invocation of repeated 'Tiger Tiger', the uncontrollable power of fire invoked by 'burning bright' picked up from the blazing pattern of the tiger's coat and the uncountable shapes in a shapeless darkness suggested in the phrase 'forests of the night', all these are met by terms of an opposite polarity, almost another realm of discourse in the words 'frame' and 'symmetry', with their suggestions of limitation control and power. Part at least of the power of that verse is generated by the counterpoint and tension between the words that are constrained by Blake to share forever the same stanza. It is what makes the symmetry of his poem so fearful.

### ***Images and Allusion:***

What is true of the individual words and phrases is even truer of the images they evoke. We must let the images as well as the words have this interplay between one another, and not just within a single poem but across the whole inter-related network of poetry which is our inheritance:

T.S. Eliot expressed this truth brilliantly in his critical writing and exemplified it in his verse. For Eliot there was a sense in which all poetry is contemporary. What is written now is not only influenced by what has been written in the past but in itself modifies the way we read the poetry of the past. It shines new lights upon it and makes new connections. As he wrote in his seminal essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* first published in 1919, we must have 'a perception, not only

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<sup>4</sup> In *The Poetical Works of William Blake* edited by John Sampson, OUP 1952 p85  
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of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.’<sup>5</sup> At the end of that essay he goes on to say that a good poet lives ‘in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past,... he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.’<sup>6</sup>

Eliot's poetry is full of this sense of the present moment of the past, of the way an image from another poet changes the way he sees things now but also the way he sees things now changes the way we read the old poets. For example, there is a powerful moment in the *Wasteland* when Eliot describes London commuters walking mechanically in a great dull crowd all looking down and seeming to breathe in unison and he says:

‘So many, I had not thought death had undone so many’<sup>7</sup>

When I first read this poem I felt this line simply as a poetic insight into the ‘nightmare life-in-death’ that modern living had imposed upon these ‘lost’ souls, but later I came to read Carey's great nineteenth century translation of Dante's *Inferno*, and came to his harrowing description of his first sight of the dead, the crowd of souls in Limbo who had just drifted through life neither struggling to the heights of real virtue nor sinking to the depths of real depravity. Looking on them in horror as they trudge in step together endlessly round and round in a circle Dante exclaims:

...I should n’ere

Have thought that death so many had despoiled<sup>8</sup>

What happens at such a moment of echo and allusion, congruence and connection? At one level I am remembering the *Wasteland* and suddenly realising that Eliot had been alluding to Dante

<sup>5</sup> T.S.Eliot *Selected Prose* edited by Frank Kermode (Faber 1975) p.38

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* p.44

<sup>7</sup> ‘The *Wasteland*’ lines 62-3 in T.S.Eliot *Collected Poems* 1909-1962 (Faber 1974) p.65

<sup>8</sup> *The Vision of Dante* translated by H.F. Carey (OUP 1923) Canto III lines 53-4, p.9

and seeing what a brilliant thing it was to compare the rush-hour crowd to the crowds in Limbo. But at another level, at the level of the effect that Dante's poem is having on me now, it is Dante who is alluding to Eliot, Dante who is brilliantly comparing the crowds in Limbo with the London rush hour! There is a profound sense in which after Eliot, Dante's poem is changed forever. Each poem subtly modifies all the poems with which it is connected running backwards and forwards through time across the great web of Poetry itself.

### ***Ambiguity and Ambivalence:***

We must be open to, and delighted with, ambiguity. We are entering a realm where only multiple meanings will do if we are at last to find 'something understood'. For example the phrase 'the soul's blood' in *Prayer* carries with it both the sense of blood as a sign of woundedness and hurt, of anguish, like Christ's sweating blood in his agony in the garden, and also the sense of blood as the very force and essence of life itself. We must not feel obliged to choose between these senses. Herbert is telling us that prayer is both the blood of our souls in the sense that prayer is what bleeds from us when we are in agony or anguish, and also the blood of our souls in the sense that without prayer our souls are bloodless, anaemic, starved of their real life.

We must also be ready to hear more than one voice, more than one tone in the poetry we read. For poetry as a medium is able to express both faith and doubt in one moment, to express at one and the same moment both the fulfilment and the frustration of our experience. Philip Larkin, whose honesty compelled him to deny himself the comforts of a faith he feared was false, but at the same time to acknowledge its real fruits, was a master of this delicate combination of avowal and denial, as we shall see in more detail in chapter seven. For now I would like to take notice of the last verse of his famous poem 'An Arundel Tomb', a poem which describes the effigies of an Earl and Countess, who are depicted on their joint monument as holding hands, and whose monument had therefore become something of a romantic icon. Larkin explores the truth or falsity of such ideals of romantic love in the course of the poem, which concludes with the

famous last line:

What will survive of us is love

Taken out of context, as it often is, this line seems quite unambiguous, but in the context of the poem it is not a slogan about love but rather a recognition that something neither the sculptor nor his subjects meant might be *close* to truth. It is not a simple 'I've found something to keep me going in the face of death', but a feeling that what I *almost* want to be true *almost* is, and so the faith hidden in Larkin's honest reticence qualifies his conclusion:

Time has transfigured them into/Untruth. The stone fidelity/They hardly meant has come to be/Their final Blazon, and to prove/Our almost-instinct almost true/What will survive of us is Love.<sup>9</sup>

Larkin forces us to keep the ringing finality of his last line in tension with his unsuppressed doubts.

### **Perspective and Paradox:**

If we want the final and most fruitful shift in our perspective which the moments of transfiguration in poetry, the moments when the mirror becomes a window, will bring, then we must expect, and be trained by, the other shifts in perspective through which a great poet takes us. Like a Zen master with his Koan, like Christ in his parables, the poet sometimes administers a sudden shock of reversal that brings a new level of enlightenment. 'You have not chosen me, I have chosen you',<sup>10</sup> says Christ to the disciples. You think you are reading the poem, but the poem is reading you, or as in the masterstroke we noted in *The Rainstick*, just as we are the scientific observer looking at the pipe from outside and noting its features, suddenly we are what we observe:

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<sup>9</sup> Phillip Larkin *Collected Poems* edited with an Introduction by Anthony Thwaite, (Faber 1988 )pp110-111

<sup>10</sup> John 15:16

You stand there like a pipe being played by water<sup>11</sup>

In many ways this line of Heaney's sums up all I am trying to say about the way we should read poetry. We must allow ourselves to be *played*, to become an instrument, to let the poet's choice and arrangement of words strike chords, find melody, and bring out in us the unexpected music which we had never known was waiting to be played, as Keats says of this experience:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard,  
Are sweeter; therefore ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone<sup>12</sup> So Heaney says, alluding surely to these lines in Keats, but also giving us a promise of what is to come from great poetry yet to be encountered:

What happens next is a music that you never would have known

To listen for.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Heaney *The Spirit Level*, (Faber 1996) p.1

<sup>12</sup> 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' lines 10-14 in *The Poetical works of John Keats* ed. HW Garrod (Oxford 1939) p.261

<sup>13</sup> Heaney *The Spirit Level*, (Faber 1996) p.1