

Getting to Know a Poem

1.

One afternoon some years ago now I was walking along Waikuku Beach, on New Zealand's Pacific coast north of Christchurch. There were several sets of footprints in the sand, and casually I began that old game of stepping in one of these trails. I found I was unable to do so without substantially changing my own gait, but after a while I had it: an uneven stride, longer in the right step than the left, the legs somewhat apart. Virtually a limp, the body slumping over into the placement of the left foot...

I walked like this for quite some time, trying to enter fully into the movement demanded by that set of footprints. At some point I realised I had cramped my left arm against my side, and that I was looking fixedly at the sand before me, my head lolling towards the left. I had entered into a pathology. I looked up and recognised the walker coming back towards me. For a moment I was gazing into a mirror, and then I realised that I was the image.

Heading back, I began thinking about the ways through which I get to know a poem — for instance, by walking in its footsteps to find out the characteristic manner of its movement. Each poem requires the reader to move differently. This is an early stage in relationship.

Walking along other beaches subsequently with other poems, reflecting on the processes of reading, I learned to observe several stages in getting to know a poem. At each one of these stages I saw that I engaged differently with the text (and its context), registering it through what I recognise as four distinct 'senses'.

2.

The process of getting to know a poem is rather like getting to know a person. When I first meet someone, there are first impressions: appearances. The way he or she looks, the sound of the voice. And beneath the surface, all kinds of intimations. This phrase 'beneath the surface' is apposite, because true knowing *is* penetration, it *is* disclosure, a process of consciousness from the periphery towards the centre — and, from the other, a reciprocal process of 'surfacing'...

There are several stages in this activity of penetration, this 'removing of the clothes', this 'surfacing'. First, there is an immediate encounter with the physical appearance, as object, as form, but also, simultaneously, there are other observations. As I get to know someone, I will note a range of habitual behaviours: gestures, characteristic movements, rhythmic patterns. A good way to observe these is to go for a walk together, and to be attentive to the way the other person's habits and pattern of life-movement affect me.

Then, perhaps sitting across a table from each other, perhaps in a café sipping coffee, another stage of unclothing, or of disclosing, takes place: encountering likes and dislikes, preferences, through a sharing of ideas, experiences, values, and what a whole range of things means to

one another. I thus begin to observe the other's character. And we begin to understand our reactions to one another.

Ultimately — and this may take some time — as we penetrate into the central biographical motifs of one another, there can be a point at which so much has been revealed that there is no more to say. We become silent, communing. Yet here I am active still, indwelling the centre, the other experienced as my periphery: being in the presence of the spirit, of his or her 'daimon' or genius.

3.

I get to know poems in a similar way. The initial impression is always of the poem as sense-object; at this first stage of acquaintance I perceive marks on the page, sound in the ear. And because a poem is primarily utterance, I want to experience it through my *sense of hearing* as a physical event, as a texture of sound, of tone. However, this is often subliminal, because other sensations tend to overwhelm it. The perception of the poem as physical object seems relatively unimportant; I am so immediately involved in more than black squiggles upon a white surface, or vibrations in the ear. Yet some judgments of the poem will have already taken place at this level of writing-object or sound-object. It is a fleeting impression, and so now something else may have engaged me — an image usually, just a couple of lines catching at my attention, signalling something to look forward to knowing more thoroughly.

My sense of hearing registers sounds, but there is another kind of awareness, inside this one as it were, which perceives the sounds as language. I can experience poetry in any language, physically as sound (noise, in effect), and also as a finely-patterned movement of sounds, an articulated form whose shape is perceptible even though it may not be understood as meaning. This is experienced through a *sense for language*, through which I perceive what I think the linguist Noam Chomsky means by 'deep structure'. At this stage of getting to know a poem, I take it for a walk. It accompanies me, sometimes for weeks, as I notice the way it moves, its gesture in turning from line to line, and its characteristic rhythms and patterns. These are the 'sinews of its syntax'. I experience this especially through speaking the poem aloud while walking along in its footprints, and noticing how it affects me. How I begin to move...

Only after this familiarisation do I really settle down to inquire into the poem: sitting at a table, maybe drinking some coffee, examining its diction, the luggage of the words — both denotation and connotation — and the character of its images. This is a search into the semantic structure of the poem, into its ideas and its story. Thomas Carlyle wrote that 'language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body of Thought', but I would prefer to consider that sounds are the flesh, and language itself is the living formative-body, the garment. There is substance, and there is form; I experience both these elements in the first two stages of encounter.

And then there is this 'body of thought'. Words bear meanings; in the field of linguistics, semantics is the study of this content of thought-perception. When Ezra Pound wrote that an image 'presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time', he was clearly concerned with what can be experienced through this spontaneous and intuitive awareness

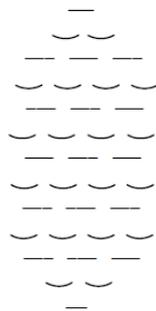
of thought. There is some sense of an ‘articulated something’, which I comprehend through the concepts which I already have. Poems especially can stimulate this activity of the *concept-sense* (or *thought-sense*), because in poetry language is being used in a potent way.

There are poems which remain with the reader, as a kind of location to be dwelt in. Such poems do seem inhabitable. Here there is a difference between the articulated something and something articulate — ‘theme’ is more than the body of thought. There is also the poet’s ‘voice’, a sensing of that unique poetic individuality. And in some poems there seems to be something else present; they seem to have their own quality of being, quite separate from the poet.

This observation of presence in a poem is analogous to the way in which I become aware of a human individual as a unique being, through an *ego-sense*. In the case of Shakespeare, for instance, due to that quality John Keats called ‘negative capability’ which he felt was pre-eminently active in the great playwright — his ability to be ‘in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ — I sense not so much his own ego but the spirit of the language itself.

4.

I want here to consider particular poems at each of these four levels of experience. One of the most visually notable poems in any language is Christian Morgenstern’s ‘Fish’s Nightsong’:



There really is a lot to see in this poem: its form, its rhythms, the images (scales, the outline of a fish, most likely a sole, moonlight on rippling water), its humour... Immediately, a high level of organisation is experienced, a structural element that does not seem arbitrary. An aural equivalent, which disconcerted the Strathclyde transport executive when Edwin Morgan sent it to them in response to a request for some poems for the walls of their refurbished Underground system, is his ‘Loch Ness Monster’s Song’:

Sssnnnwhuffffll?
Nhwhuffl hhnwfl hnfl hfl?
Gdroblboblhobngbl gbl gl g g g glgl.
Drubhlablhaflubhafgabhaflhafl fl fl —
gm grawwww grf grawf awfgm graw gm.
Hovoplodok-doplovok-plovodokot-doplodokosh?
Splgaw fok fok splgrafhatchgabrlgabrl fok splfok!

Zgra kra gka fok!
Grof Grawff gahf?
Gombl mbl bl —
blm plm,
blm plm,
blm plm,
blp.

Morgan's performance of this 'tone-poem' is utterly memorable! Within the more common conventions of English, however, examples of aurally fine sound include these famous lines by William Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson respectively:

All shod with steel
We hissed along the polished ice

~

The moan of doves in immemorial elms
And murmuring of innumerable bees

Or more recently, this final couplet to a sonnet by the contemporary poet Geoffrey Hill, as rich in phonetic intensives as anything by Tennyson:

tremulous boudoirs where the crystals kissed
in cabinets of amethyst and frost.

Speak these two lines aloud. Heard, they have an effect prior to meaning, a quality which is musical in character, and which is essentially an experience of a physical body-resonance. The crystalline tinkling of both light and sound is heard in the significant silence of the bedroom. At the furthest pole of this experience of hearing words as sound are those words which actually represent the sounds of physical things, and the sounds made by creatures:

swish / splat / drip / tick-tock / clunk (etc)
cuckoo / moo / miaow / woof (etc)

Onomatopoeia therefore represents the physical body of an auditory image. For instance, Galway Kinnell begins a poem with such an evocation of sound:

Pcheek pcheek pcheek pcheek
They cry. The motherbirds thieve the air
To appease them...

5.

The poem by Edwin Morgan, as spoken by him, is however more than just a few marks on the page, a 'motley bunch of sounds'. It is a clearly articulated flow of sound, having not only structured substance but also apparently possessing an inner form which seems to parallel the syntactic movements of a language. It emulates living utterance.

Taking a poem for a walk, I will find out its life. Move about the room, and speak aloud 'The Loch Ness Monster's Song'. Or, for a very different outing, go walking with Wordsworth's 'The Prelude', pacing out its measured iambics along a path, appreciating the quick reflexive quality of the enjambed (run-on) lines, so often suspended from verbs or prepositions; and then the momentary pause mid-line at a caesura, when he calmly casts his gaze around him at the streams and groves and mountains... Or, with Whitman's 'Song of Myself', find another insistent and egoistic energy, in the striding, pausing, gesticulating, and sounding one's 'barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world'...

For a more contemporary instance, take these lines by one of New Zealand's finest poets, the late Allen Curnow, from his 'Early Days Yet'. In this poem he recalls outings with his father, a parish minister, in his 1919 Model T Ford:

... Any old song the

motor beats out finds
words in his head
O forest, green

*and fair, O pine-
tree, waving high,
How sweet your cool*

*retreat, How fresh
and fair A great
way off's too near*

by far, the dust's
at our eyes already,
with a high warm wind,

with a whiff of japanned
seat-cushion, a shudder
with a skitter of rubber

on a rutted macadam,
with hey, ho Bang!
And with thy spirit.

Whether engendered by his memories of lurching along rutted roads in the Model T, or by walking on the dark iron-ore sands of the Karekare shoreline he frequented when writing poetry, these lines enact rhythmically the whole vitality of Curnow's supposed purpose, proving to my mind the bold claim of the title. Throughout this poem (written in the poet's late eighties), movement and structure are congruent. It arouses its own sensations quite independently of meaning, whilst confirming that meaning.

6.

At the third stage of encounter, I will summarise here what I first wrote, at greater length, in *A Way of Seeing*. In the developing dialogue with a poem to discover meaning, the essentially 'poetic' element is to be experienced through its figurative language, expressed in metaphor, simile, and image.

Consider the following lines by two New Zealand poets, each in her way relating the poetic process to events in the world:

the wind is writing
what it knows
in lines along the water

~ Laura Ranger

~

a lyric is like water and water
is walked alongside, and loved

~ Dinah Hawken

Ranger uses a metaphor, Hawkin a simile. Some commentators on poetics now make no real distinction between the two, but there is a fundamental difference in their respective natures. Metaphor is impossible except in the Imagination, an essentially magical association of two different things, derived from that ancient consciousness in which everything is intimately related to everything else. The simile, however, is the kind of comparison which the rational intellect can construct in observing the relationship between different things, and can be appreciated both as empirical reality as well as imaginative truth.

The essence of metaphor derives from the activity of what Rudolf Steiner has called the *Sentient Soul*; simile, from the *Intellectual Soul*. Metaphor lives in the very roots of our language, as identified by Owen Barfield, and can be observed everywhere in Old English verse such as 'Beowulf':

A boat with a ringed neck rode in the haven

Simile appears most notably in late medieval Middle English, as a cultural import via Latin and French, and can be found particularly in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (in the following example, recognition of the slightly opaque nature of medieval glass makes the image especially memorable):

Her eyes as grey as glass

Metaphor touches towards the unsayable; simile says what can be said. The poetic image, however, represents the content of a third stage of consciousness, a fusion of the magical and the rational. It is really a mysterious linguistic event; after defining the poetic image as 'an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time', Ezra Pound continues:

It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.

This is remarkably like those descriptions of the *satori* moment of enlightenment in Zen Buddhism. Gaston Bachelard, the French phenomenologist, has described an image as 'a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche'. I gaze out at the ocean, and something seems to surge up towards the surface. Is it the dark inner body of a wave? a dolphin? a shark? a mass of kelp? or a log of driftwood rolling over? the shadow of a cloud? For a moment, my imagination is engaged in wonder, a sense of mystery. When at last I can identify the phenomenon, something of this momentary *frisson* dies away in my mind.

A great image is one which continues to surge up to the surface of consciousness and stimulate that astonishing moment of wonder. Bill Manhire's 'Poem' offers a particularly fine example:

When we touch,
forests enter our bodies.

The dark wind shakes the branch.
The dark branch shakes the wind.

The first two lines of this poem cannot be comprehended analytically. They are pure magic, a metaphor. The next two lines seem simple and attractive enough, and on their own they are rather like the following 'Small Poem' by A.R. Ammons:

The reeds give
way to the

wind and give
the wind away

But whereas Ammons' poem is a delightful word-play which conveys an impression of the movement of reeds in wind, and of the movement of wind in reeds, Manhire, through his first lines, rather than projecting consciousness outwards, has drawn the forest right into the bodies of the lovers, the wind and the branch then evoking for me a wonderfully erotic image which afterwards continues to shake the mind. This is the experience, appreciated through the *Consciousness Soul* (or self-conscious soul) that Pound characterised as 'that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits'.

7.

In 1980 I met a woman who was to become a dear friend — Barbara Hamblett. We met several times before she returned to Sweden, and I promised to visit her and her husband in Järna, should I ever go there. Subsequently I did visit Järna in 1983, but in the meantime an accident in which I had sustained a head injury obliterated parts of my memory, and not once did I think of either Barbara or Derek while I was there.

Upon returning to Christchurch, my memory was restored through a remarkable circumstance. An acquaintance asked me if I had ever written a poem titled 'Hymn to the Earth' — a friend now living in Sweden had recently been given a copy of it and wondered whether the poet was the same John Allison whom she had met in New Zealand. It was indeed my poem, and it was of course my forgotten friend, Barbara — who had been sent the poem by another acquaintance in Sydney, where it had been presented by someone else in a poetry reading... Articulating the sense of alienation as a basis of illness in contemporary life, and looking towards a cure, its concluding lines were a call:

There can be no more going away
from here.

 Come nearer.

Nearer this dawn in the heart.

Now.

This poem seemed to have a 'destiny' of its own, meeting and befriending people around the world. News of its further travels came to me from time to time. When Barbara and Derek subsequently returned to live in New Zealand, until her death in 1990, it seemed indeed to have brought us nearer to some kind of dawn in the heart. Sitting by her emaciated body, keeping vigil, I thought again of those lines. As so often with my earlier work, I am not so impressed by the poetic merits of this particular poem, written when I was twenty-two; but it seems to have connected with the inner yearnings of quite a number of people. I find it rather intriguing that a poem is somewhat like a person — it can have a 'biography', and it can even develop a network of acquaintances who themselves may have mutual connections.

We know that in the former Soviet Union, and in South American countries, poems have had important lives. How many poems might live like this? Of course I cannot assert that they have a true 'ego-being'; but they do indeed seem to have something individual, a remarkable quality of presence. What do I 'sense' this presence with? The process seems analogous to the activity of the ego-sense. Has something really been gathered into such a poem, or is it rather a matter of perceived reputation, the significance of the poem established within culture? In Jungian terms it might be suggested that the poem has been established in the collective unconscious, or that it evokes something archetypal...

I consider it is not so much the incarnation of the spirit into a poem, or the ego-presence of the poet that I detect, but rather that the genius of the language itself seems to hover about the poem, as purpose, speaking through the bodies of sound, linguistic form, and meaning. In this context, the poem perhaps with the most extensive biography is William Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 116' which must have been associated with more lovers than any other:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments, love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.

Oh no! it is an ever fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, though his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come,
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom:
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Speak it, and listen: note the sound-texture of the poem, how the consonants and vowels resonate — for instance, those *m*'s lifting into *l*'s during the first three lines. And observe the strictures of shape in the sonnet's 'cage of form', its architecture of rhythm and rhyme.

Take it for a walk: experience how this sonnet approaches the issue with an intent enthusiasm, the movement in that first line syncopated across the underlying iambic pentameter, and how it is straining at the bars of the cage; feel how energetic its movement is at each of the enjambed line-endings, or at each mid-line pause or caesura; and yet also how it then steadies rhythmically, from that skipping, bouncy opening through the solemn procession of the argument, to the final nonchalant pirouette of the last two lines.

Then sit down with it, seeking a deeper acquaintance, and carefully observe the formulation of its thought throughout the sonnet structure, yet in a remarkably simple diction: notice how the general statement in the first four lines is further developed in imagery concerned with spatial relationships in the next four lines; and then with temporal relationships in the third quatrain. Love is thus made central to existence in the world, and is proven even before that quietly-stated yet challenging assertion of the final couplet.

At last you can just remain in its presence, its qualities remaining present in you. Just like an intimate friend involved in 'a marriage of true minds'.

~ John Allison

Note: This essay first appeared in *Poetry New Zealand 20* (2000), and subsequently in revised form in the *Annual of the Literary Arts and Humanities*, published in 2002 by Verlag am Goetheanum, Dornach, Switzerland. It is the first essay in *Walking Out of Another World* (Immortal Books 2010)