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Andrew Waterman on Himself

Being asked to write about my own poetry requires me to articulate what, as I understand it, I'm up to, and why. My instinct is to generalise mainly, before discussing a little the two particular poems of mine printed here.

Misapprehensions flourish about the nature of poetry and the creative process, many of them inflicted by formal education on all-too-unquestioning recipients. I happen, during recent years, to have been a literature lecturer at a university. For me, this is incidental and unnecessary to myself as a poet; as, correspondingly, literature being under the umbrella of the universities at all is a state of affairs recent in time and wholly dispensable to the interests of literature: poems, plays, novels, their continuance and wellbeing, and the intelligent reading of them. Good occurs under the auspices of the academy: some lecturers and critics can afford the right recipient some stimulus and illumination, though that can only be secondary to what goes on between the book and the reader and no pretentious claims should be made for the "teaching" of literature; and some people who might never otherwise have happened upon, say, Jane Austen, or Wallace Stevens, read them as a result of coming to a university from whatever mixed muddle of motives, and are excited to discover that what is going on in these books connects with their own struggle with experience and life-pilgrimage. But then there are also the bad effects: the pygmy pedantry; the "scholar" who because he's actually counted and classified, say, the disease images in *Hamlet*, thinks he understands what's going on in the play more intelligently than poor old Shakespeare who never bothered to do this but only put it all together; the whole academic racket. It is infinitely easier (and also more likely to further his career) for a university lecturer both to concoct and to get into print a scholarly or critical article, than to write a decent poem, play or novel. A Chinese wall of explication is built round the original "texts," and people, students and "laymen," can be frightened off. The general pernicious effect of the academy setting itself up as the custodian of literature is that—in this society where everyone is supposed to be an accredited expert in one "field" and is therefore by definition a layman in every other—literature is falsely made to be seen as a narrow specialism. Roped-off within a syllabus, judiciously served up and garnished by "trained" "professionals" (if their Catullus came their way, modern classicists, however he flummoxed them, certainly wouldn't give him a job in a Latin department teaching Catullus—where's his Ph.D.?), to the less perceptive and courageous students literature no longer seems to have much to do with "real life," which is their boy or girl friend and tonight's party in Coleraine. This is of course partly the fault and the failure of these students. One has known the undergraduate who, confronted with a poem by George Herbert, dismisses that and all other pre-twentieth-century

poetry as “old fashioned,” “soppy stuff that rhymes,” then from his class in my office descends one floor to the university bar, puts a shilling in the jukebox, and out comes—soppy stuff that rhymes. One tries to tell him about literary and artistic conventions. And to many people both inside universities and among the general public outside, poetry also tends to seem something merely “arty,” peripheral to life’s central concerns, unnecessary, not a culture’s lifeline, but a “cultured” pastime.

All of which dismays me. To me, writing poetry is, if special, not specialist, and not at all marginal. It emerges from what is at the core of every human being, and is indeed the central and distinguishing quality of humanity: the ongoing, involuntary impulse and struggle to clarify from the bewildering hail of experience some sort of meaning and pattern, however partial or momentary. The distinctive *human* process. One can recognise it going on in everyone, including those conventionally dubbed “inarticulate.” The railwayman who, talking in a pub, sorts his way through to the reality that, despite whatever the Tory adman or socialist materialist tell him he ought to want in the way of cocktail cabinets or money-objects for a happy life, what really matters most to him and fulfills him is, say, keeping greyhounds or doing the garden, is living this process, being most fully himself. To write is its special extension: different in degree, more intensive, verbally skilled, wrought, but not disjunctive in kind; and it is in the great literature one values that one finds the most profound and subtle explorations and clarifications of what it is to be human that are available to us.

One writes first for one’s own sake: as Pound put it, “No art ever yet grew by looking into the eyes of the public.” With luck, one’s words, poems, are accessible, communicate—which one wants also. For a poet is no “specialist” in the sense that an astrophysicist validly is: he is someone trying to be, as honestly and fully as he can, “a man speaking to men.” One’s own experience, as such, has no claim on a reader’s interest: it is only made poetry if it is in the writing given a universality, a shape that floats free of the particular mesh and course of one’s own life, to exist as an artifact or organism able to embody for others some significance, some emotion, for which the poem’s realised world whether factual or invented in origin is a framework. One preserves things in poems; but even those obviously personal may not be strictly factual: one selects, reorders, extends the actual creatively, mingles details plundered from disparate times, places, people, tests possibilities—trying to come at and define truths which underly mere circumstance.

As for the actual process, how a poem begins and evolves until it is finished (abandoned?), again the academic approach, and hence general “lay” understanding, tend to get this wrong. The academic critic starts from the conclusion of the process: the finished poem. His methods and

tools are analytical. In the nature of the case, most formal criticism, while of course not necessarily referring explicitly to the creative process at all, does tend implicitly to postulate that the poet starts with an "idea" for a poem, then as it were pulls out a drawer in his "imagination," picks out suitable components, and screws them together into the poem. Like making a Meccano model. After all, this is what the critic does in reverse: starts with the "construct," and analytically dismantles it, bolt by bolt, into its component parts. Anyone who bothers to attend to what poets themselves, from the Romantics to Eliot and beyond, have been saying about the process of creation, will get a different, less cut-and-dried, and truer picture, emphasising the "given" and unconscious sources of poetry, in ways that by no means diminish but enhance, while keeping supplementary, the function of deliberative intelligence in coaxing and refining these indefinite, elusive and intractable materials into defined and telling verbal shape. It is all analogous not to engineering construction done from a blueprint, but rather to extricating, one might even say *conjuring*, an at first tenuously conceived sculpture whole from the given lump of marble. It is certainly a process of *discovery*.

A poem, I find, begins with a nag, sparked off in one by some image, detail, incident, perhaps casually encountered or randomly recalled. It may be the way a tree-shadow falls across a field, a stack of cans on a shop-counter, a fragment of conversation remembered or overheard, or of course a dream. A poem may even start with something more apparently abstract, a rhythm, shape, movement. A point arrives when the nag starts one jotting, writing, trying to clarify—and only *that* discovers what, if anything, one has to say, and whether it can be won into poetry. When the poem is done, the crucial, initiating detail may even have disappeared from it, left behind like the gills of our remote pre-mammalian ancestors—yet as vital to the evolution of the final form.

These generalities about the nature and processes of poetry, as I find them, will I hope offer some general guidelines for anyone reading my poems who wonders what I think I'm at, whether in my work as a whole or specifically in "The Mountains" and "The Old, Cast up on Lawns." Obviously, trying for something doesn't guarantee its success, and I leave evaluation of what I write to others. Nor am I here concerned to offer a guided tour of what seem to emerge as some recurring obsessions shaping my work generally: hankerings after the fictive Garden; an inability ever really to escape spiritually the single room of self more binding in imagination than any actuality; an appalled sense of life's alternative possibilities, the fragility yet irrevocableness of choice; pervasively, the gulf, and energising tension, between the irredeemable real and impossible ideal, that crucially give focus and direction. And because also I do not wish to develop particular-

ised explanation to the point where I seem to be perpetrating a paraphrase or “crib” of one of my own poems, I shall offer only such hints about “The Mountains” and “The Old, Cast up on Lawns” as I might suppose helpful, or of curiosity value, to, say, an audience at a reading or a friend in a bar.

“The Mountains” was written after, intermittently through a period of months, I’d experienced a series of dreams in which mountains—always essentially those of the west of Ireland which I’ve got to know while living in the country for the last seven years—seemed to feature encircling, superimposing themselves on, taking over, various other of my known landscapes, usually English and belonging to earlier periods of my life. So there were curious dream-juxtapositions. The mountains would loom above the roofs and at the ends of the South London streets of my childhood, a strange and sometimes sinister backcloth to whatever was going on in the dream. Or they’d be a surrounding presence beyond the edge of familiar Leicester, where I lived for several years in the mid-sixties, and the events of the dream might lure me out into wild Connemara trackways; or I’d need to reach them, but be unable to, deflected and wound back by the maze of streets. And so on. The dreams kept recurring, with variations, until the night I found myself in a glider, and floated to a summit, and seemed to see the world steadily and whole, and climbed down possessed with need to tell the people I’d been with. Much of all this is in the poem, but selected, shaped, imaginatively ordered. Also in the poem, as a detail, is my experience when, happening last summer for the first time for seventeen years to stay for some period at my married sister’s, in the part of Croydon I grew up in, friends and acquaintances of hers called round, and remembered me from primary school, and had continued always to live there, and had got married—through all the years I’d been away. And strangely—yet of course *not* strangely, except from my perspective—here they still were, women in their thirties, their younger faces unexpectedly recalled, *recognised*—yet now overlain, worn, puffy, as they trailed about and worried over *their* children now growing up in those streets and parks which to me are the “past.” All of which seemed naturally to come into conjunction with the mountain-dreams in the course of writing the poem. As did the old shepherd I once met just below the top of Mount Brandon (Ireland’s second-highest, rising spectacularly from the sea in the Dingle Peninsula). He was no part of any dream, but actual, a man talked to in 1973, whose livelihood took him up and down the slopes as a matter of course, who, unlike myself who had just done so, would never have thought to climb to the summit “because it’s there,” for its own or the view’s sake. The mountain was as unquestioned a part of his life as the weather, not a special challenge or enticement. Those are (simplified in stating them of course) some of the poem’s ingredients. I could cite others: the face, the “clear brow” of a

height and a piece with the mountains inaccessibly in a dream beyond and above the South London street-ends, was that of a girl I knew at the time; there is a distinction made in the poem between daytime consciousness when engaging with and accepting the challenge of the mountains is a voluntary, chosen activity, and the night mountains by which one was possessed involuntarily. Anyway: in writing, which the glider-dream edged me into, as well as just trying to record or preserve, within a defined formal shape, something of all this, as well too as perhaps seeking to *exorcise* the recurring, often frightening dreams, I was also striving to come at, to elicit, something of what possibly “the mountains” stood for, *symbolised* to me. Something, it emerged, to do with an order or dimension of what is *for me* “reality,” always present, looming; and of challenging importance; yet found to be ignored, and perhaps not even recognised, by people as one moves among them in the public world; not at any rate acknowledged as part of the real business of life. Death, the sinister omnipresence of its certain encroachment? Poetry, and all in life and feeling that goes into poetry? It is narrowing and unnecessary to opt exclusively for either, or any other, particular interpretation. The mountains are best left suggestive, resonant—whether or not the poem is any good is largely a matter of my success in conveying that.

I offer much briefer “explanation” of “The Old, Cast up on Lawns.” This poem is very apparently a wondering at, and an attempt to engage imaginatively with, the state of being of the very old, who are close to death, worn seemingly beyond the agitations, desires, sorrows of youth and maturity; who perhaps out of habit and politeness merely enter into the processes of ordinary daily life, intercourse, feeling, caring. The poem expresses a *wondering*, and a need to define the terms of one’s relationship to “the old” who are now where we shall ourselves be one day. How can consciousness of imminent death *not* obliterate all everyday concerns? Surely the old must, with behind them all the accumulated vicissitudes of their own life-efforts, be eroded or satiated *past* caring about what stirs and moves those still in the middle of it all? The poem makes no assertions: it questions.

An important defining and expressive part of any poem, its meaning and its effects on a reader, must be its form, rhythms, shape. In the course of writing, the proper form, and movement, which can be discovered, commonly with a sense of *recognition*, early or late, but are indispensable to the poem’s successful completion, become intrinsic to what one has to say. These formal qualities and requirements are also a helpful practical discipline for the poet, curbing any tendency to sprawl, ruthlessly exposing, by rhythmical uncertainty or falter, any place where the poetry wobbles or blurs.

In “The Mountains” the lines are intendedly long and flowing, cadenced, so that the poem should seem to wind sinuously and musingly through the

dream-hinterland it is about, its movement flexing, expanding and contracting like the encircling mountains—through to the abrupt worldly “rejection” of the final short line.

In writing “The Old, Cast up on Lawns,” the recognition that four four-line stanzas was the “necessary” form helped me pare redundant detail.

Uncomely Relations / Edward Brunner

I

In 1953, in an essay entitled “American Literature and the American Language,” T. S. Eliot remarked on the possibility that speech in England and speech in America were developing in such a way as to bring about two entirely distinct literatures, to each of which the other would be a foreign language. Characteristically, Eliot brought the problem to rest by invoking the examples of himself and W. H. Auden, both of whom, he tactfully hinted, had managed to transcend the division between the races. In 1953, with Eliot in command, the problem could be put away, and poets in both countries seemed to oblige by writing poems superficially similar, in distinct verse-forms with rhyme and meter and well-mannered imagery. But, to echo Virginia Woolf, sometime around 1960 human nature changed. Just as in 1910, with the death of King Edward, the long reign of Victoria came officially to an end, so in 1960, with the retirement of Eisenhower, the long post-war period of level momentum was brought to a close. American poetry began to be speculative, anxious, analytical, as it had been in the twenties. The Black Mountain poets, who had persisted in the tenets of modernism throughout the fifties, brought poetry back to an experimental, mythological, international base. And, in the group of young American poets convened for an earlier symposium in *The Iowa Review*, there are, correspondingly, imprints of surrealism, with “deep” images imported from Neruda, Vallejo and others, and of course everything is written in an open form—the poetry is naked and the poets are exposed. But, when we turn to the British poets grouped here, we discover something entirely different: only one, Robin Munro, fully trusts to the open approach, and with the single exception of Nigel Wells, the language is generally restrained and deliberately low-keyed. Instead of remorseless self-exposure, there is a definite interest in larger problems, problems of an entire society. Eliot’s prediction has come to pass.

The result of this evident division has been, until recently, an increasing defensiveness on the part of those concerned with British poetry. Beginning in 1962, when A. Alvarez opened his Penguin anthology, *New Poetry*, with Lowell and Berryman and trailed all the new British poets behind them, the tendency has been to judge British poetry in American terms.