Notes for Broadsheet Poets 10

Many poets compose poems about the actual writing of a poem. Here are a few examples that came in recently.

In this poem, with its assonantal (vowel) end rhymes, **Ann Leahy**, who lives in Dublin, writes about an 'unknown poem' which relates to the 'unknown poem' of Auden, extracts from which feature in these **Notes** later. Ann's poems have won many prizes and awards and she has appeared in several anthologies.

Wishing Lines

I put words down along a line
Hoping for a turn of phrase
That will whisk them off and away
To snatch a sigh from a telegraph wire,

Catch a burble of a broken main,
A patch of sunlight from a two-tiered
Interchange, swirl them back to me,
Trailing a whiff of mugwort, a trace

Of old man's beard, and carrying an overtone
Of something I haven't yet pegged down.

I think a lot of poets would identify with the way **Amy Handler** suggests we can never actually own the words we use in her poem, 'Artistic Process'. The language has a life of its own This recalls, perhaps at a tangent, a memorable line from **Auden**: 'Words have no word for words that are not true'.

It also brings to mind **MacNeice**'s amusing 'Elegy for Minor Poets' who were 'the world's best talkers' but 'as writers lacked a sense of touch'. So they 'either gave up or just went on and on – /Let us salute them now their chance is gone…' The following two lines apply to poets whether unknown, minor or major:

> Let the sun clamber onto the notebook, shine,
> And fill in what they groped for in each line.

Amy lives in Brookline, Massachusetts. She writes short stories also and makes films. This is her first poem to be published.

Artistic Process

Today I awake with pieces of poetry in my head.
Just like that they are there
Though I don't dream them this way.
Not quite awake I scribble them down
Before they become something else.

Is this how it is for you too?
Do your words arrive in a flash
Demanding to be written?

Now that I'm thinking, I'll put these words aside
And continue them later when I'm not.
Then the seeds of verse can rest to re-awaken me.

See how I never call them 'my' words?
This is because those un-thought never belong to me.
They live on their own
From beginning to end
While I tag along with my pen.

All poets are readers whether of their own pages, the work of others, of situations, of people, of landscapes, of the skies, of sounds, sights, textures and touches. And, of course, any single poem becomes a million different poems according to the million different readings by readers.

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The distinguished poet/critic, **Tom Paulin** offers a fresh, original approach to untapping the secret 'codes' of poems in his very recently published Poetry Primer: ***The Secret Life of Poems*** (Faber £17.99 hardback, 2008). He explained: 'I wanted to write a book which would be about the DNA structure of poetry. The way poets talk about poetry in terms of rhythm and metre and cadence… I think in terms of images or rhythms and I had the idea of writing what I hoped would be a kind of handbook.' In this stimulating resource for both writers of poetry and readers, Paulin takes forty-seven examples from throughout the ages, from Milton and Wordsworth to Auden and Heaney, and gives his unique interpretation of how he sees poetry working through the chosen poems. It was during his own reading of a poem by Yeats that he 'began to imagine a critical account of his or any poet's work which jettisoned all earnest explication of the text and concentrated on sound, cadence, metre, rhyme, form.' Conventional critical analysis of a poem is thus thrown out of the window and Paulin uncovers a finer coded structure behind the obvious structure of a poem. He articulately concentrates on a poem's acoustic memory composed of intricate sound patterns that constitute a kind of

subtext of meaning. To do this, he scans, dissects syllables, and interprets shifting rhythms and their inferences. He shows himself to be a penetrating historian who illuminates, through the sound patterns in a particular poem, the historical and political contexts that the poet may or may not be conscious of. Seen through his eyes, a poem can be saying much more than it appears to say behind images in the surface text; sounds, images, style as well as tone constitute a kind of code – often political and linked to a certain anxiety – and can say at times even more than the said, articulating on occasions what, maybe for political, religious or moral reasons, cannot actually be recorded at the time.

Paulin's approach to each poem is humble (he prefaces most of his points with 'perhaps', 'maybe', or 'it may be that', avoiding didacticism and acknowledging that these are only his propositions), and also almost visionary:

> What had always seemed to me an imperfect poem changed when I began to write about it and an altogether finer structure started to reveal itself.

Paulin might be a little wild at times in his illuminations e.g. on John Montague's 'All Legendary Obstacles': 'The guttural *k* in the pejorative "ruck" is magnified by the guttural in "obstacles". It's an untidy, scrummy word, "ruck", not too far from "fuck"'. Or, listen to this – on Robert Browning's 'Meeting at Night', referring to the lines: …'the quick sharp scratch/And blue spurt of a lighted match' which, to the uninitiated seems to be just what it says:

> This is the fire of passion, the spurt of male orgasm, the quick of life, but she is in control here. Having coded intense longing and desire to this point, the poem has nowhere else to go.

He continues to get a little carried away. The lake in Robert Frost's 'A Servant to Servants' is 'virginal' and could be 'an unstained bedsheet'; a notch cut in wood is 'a threatening phallic image', 'but the effect is vaginal, though dry and negative (the word contains "not" which can also be read as "knot", representing marriage…)' Later in the same poem, what seems to be a plain, ordinary 'book of ferns', according to Paulin, 'brings pubic hair somewhere into the image'.

Apart from such dubious claims as those just mentioned, Paulin seems very sound and plausible. He stresses 'the redemptive nature of metre' and how 'poetry begins in speech, in the skipping rhymes and chants children make up in the playground and the street' and then moves through various stages 'from oral tradition, communal memory, into print'. He adds interesting little anecdotes such as 'that most hermetic and difficult of symbolist poets', Mallarmé, teaching his school pupils English nursery rhymes to the 'great anger' of a school inspector in 1880. He recounts that 'Dryden knew that the English Language depends on the struggle between monosyllabic and polysyllabic words'. He even seems to indulge in an insider's gossip when he imparts with relish the fate of Keith Douglas's stormy affair with Antoinette Beckett who married a highly decorated South African pilot

and became active in Black Sash, a group of women who silently protested against apartheid. She ended her relationship with him when she decided she could stand his jealousy no longer, and died in Warwick aged seventy nine.

Paulin adds a fresh, lively vocabulary to poetry criticism, speaking of 'broken-backed lines', of a line 'drawing attention to itself', of Donne 'flogging the *s* sound', of Hopkins 'deliberately smashing' the rhythms, of a line being 'keyed' to the speaking voice, of what 'drives' opening lines, of internal rhyme 'boxing in' the subject, of the line being 'oiled by noun particles', of ' a deliberate push of the pen nib, its black ink seeding the last particle', of an 'annoying susurrus', of rhymes 'clicking shut', of adjectives being 'cleansed' of the 'effort' of the first few lines, of creating 'unhurried space for the unaccompanied human voice', of an *o* serving 'to fur the vowel', of 'a military push' taking place in lines that are forced up, of 'choke-bands', of language as being 'highly strung', and 'the life of language' depending on the poet's handling of it. He points out that exclamation marks should not be used flippantly, that the pace of dashes should be considered. He alerts us to the need for pauses which have their own special powers such as creating and enforcing authority, preventing a 'couplet from sounding glib', 'containing and expressing desire, or signifying rejection' as they 'follow the rhythms of the speaking voice':

> Poems depend on rhythms, but they also need pauses, sometimes deep pauses, that say more than words or rhythms can, and remind us that silence can state its own meaning.

Paulin is daring enough to choose some poems ignored by critics, such as Robert Frost's 'The Investment', and to choose other famous poems he considers no good. For example, in focusing on 'Musée des Beaux Arts' by **Auden**, he admires the intimate tender opening that 'puts the poet and the reader on an equal communicative level', and he mines into what the poem suggests in its subtext, finding political meanings in the adjectives, and coupling biographical and historical perspectives. Yet he ends up consigning it, in the poem's words, as ' "an interesting failure" by a writer who went on to become quite an important failure, writing poems in a glossy, metropolitan, intellectually inflected language that read rather like chirpy opinion pieces in the *New Yorker*'.

John Fuller, the eminent Auden scholar and poet, would not agree. In his fine 613-page ***W.H. Auden: A Commentary*** (Faber 1998), he appraises the poem: 'This is one of Auden's most celebrated short poems. Its long irregular lines create an illusory casualness of argument, which the rhymes subtly enforce'…

Paulin is far less harsh on **Louis MacNeice** and his poem 'Order to View' which he sets in its historical context and comments on its 'spreading pattern of internal rhymes', influenced by Irish poetry. He continues to demonstrate how repeated sounds such as '*en*', '*ih*', and '*o*' conjure both the atmosphere and meaning, and concludes in the typical style of the virtuoso that he is:

> That *ih* sound so dominant in the middle stanza, is cleanly revived in the last

line's 'windows', which contains the verb 'win' (the consonant *n* draws out the vowel). The *oh* sound furred by *s* is repeated in 'windows', but MacNeice bats *o* out again in the very last word 'open', where the plosive *p* stretches the sound out and lifts it up. We hear 'hope' in 'open', so this is a victorious line – demoralisation and dullness have been cast off.

Tom Paulin's singlemindedness and dedication is an example to all young poets. When he started writing poetry seriously in 1972, he would get up at seven o'clock every morning and write for an hour before going to his teaching job. As a lad of 16 or 17, he was inspired by Robert Frost's use of the vernacular. 'He taught you to respect the way people around you spoke'. A point worth listening to. And an idea to read your own poem out loud because you can then pick out the bits that don't flow, where you stumble or run out of breath. You know then where the poem needs more work.

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In **Auden**'s '**Unwritten Poem'**, '**Dichtung und Wahrheit**' there are gems of advice for young poets:

> Of any poem written by someone else, my first demand is that it be good; of any by myself, my first demand is that it be genuine, recognizable, like my handwriting, as having been written, for better or worse, by me. (When it comes to his own poems, a poet's preferences and those of his readers often overlap but seldom coincide.)
>
> The poem which I should now like to write would not only have to be good and genuine: if it is to satisfy me, it must also be true.

To Auden, recognising the poem as 'genuine' is like recognising the poet's 'handwriting'. He stresses that one has to come under the 'syllabic spell' of a poem.

> As an Artistic language, Speech has many advantages – three persons, three tenses (Music and Painting have only the Present Tense), both the active and the passive voice – but it has one serious defect: it lacks the Indicative Mood. All its statements are in the subjunctive and only possibly true until verified (which is not always possible) by non-verbal evidence.

Auden concludes this sequence by describing the 'unwritten poem':'words cannot verify themselves. So this poem will remain unwritten.'

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Nanos Valaoritis, a celebrated Greek poet, now aged 86, knew **MacNeice**, **Auden** and **Chester Kallman**, and his fascinating memoir can be read on the website (www.agendapoetry.co.uk) in the supplement to this **Lauds** issue (essay section).

The following two poems from one of Nanos's poetry collections, *Pan Daimonium* (Philos Press, Washington, 2005), illustrate beautifully how everyone, even well-known poets such as Nanos, has unwritten poems in them.

Untitled

For many years I have pursued a poem
Which regularly escapes me
It's a funny little poem
About nothing at all
If I remember well
Such as those written today
And cleverly crafted to say nothing
Yet this little poem became a hole
In my life: a small black hole
Out of which poured nothingness
And – invaded me, slowly
With its deadly darkness
While I stood there steadfast
Holding on for dear life
To the sinking twilight
And now it's too late
To remember anything
About this empty spot
This grain of something greater
Than anything in the universe.

Every Night I Dream

Every night I dream of great poetry
Quite different from mine
Or what I will ever write
And yet – every night I dream
Of this very different poetry
Composed of lines so solid
So dense and grainy
They could have been made of granite
I ask myself – what is their subject
What do they say these marvellous lines
Which to behold – will leave you aghast

They'll take your breath away
But – however – in any case – I'm sorry to say
Impossible to guess what it's all about
And I have tried and tried, believe me,
And puzzled over these lines
Day after day – and in the night
They keep on coming back
With new earthshaking and tremendous
Messages – of great import
That everyone should hear
But not a single word remains
When I open my eyes – they're gone
They vanish in pure daylight
These huge edifices – those titanic
Workings of each night.

These **Notes** were written and compiled by **Patricia McCarthy**

Marie Wilson, the wife of Nanos Valaoritis and a celebrated artist, was a close friend of the surrealist **André Breton**, **Man Ray** and **Picasso**. She also met **Auden** and **MacNeice**. Her colourful paintings can be seen on the website: www.agendapoetry.co.uk