Notes for Broadsheet Poets 7

As stated earlier in this series, all poets, young and old, need some kind of a mentor, whether living or dead, whether a teacher, listener, or critical appreciator.

Gerard Smyth, the Irish poet whose latest collections have been published by Dedalus Press, writes movingly about the kind of mentor we all need. This elegy, then, brings back to life an important mentor from his youth, a school-teacher who invoked other mentors no longer living, and whose inspiration caused 'the riddles and orisons' of his pupils to 'rise from the page'.

Riddles and Orisons

To the memory of Jack Hoey, teacher

Straight-backed, arms outflung,
in front of everyone
he stood like a singer about to sing
his favourite aria.
The dust of school-chalk
lay on his shoulders.

He read with both eyes closed,
brooded over Matthew Arnold
and Samuel Coleridge
during the last lesson of the day
when in a voice that was ceremonious
he created the atmosphere of the Lakes
just by saying *Windermere*.

Shakespeare, Yeats,
Father Hopkins, Soldier Ledwidge.
On afternoons when the glinting sun
came in or rain fell hard
on the window-ledge
he made their riddles and orisons
rise from the page.

Peter Abbs, poet and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Sussex, addresses all poets, from his wide experience, in the following essay and invokes mentors who are well-known poets from both the past and the present:

The Four Tasks of the Contemporary Poet

What marks the work of the poet and how does it relate to our new twenty-first century? Out of a number of contending possibilities I will select what I see as four key elements of the poet's creative engagement and, as I move forward, endeavour to relate them to our times.

The existential dimension

I believe the work of the poet should be existentially grounded. Being a poet is an interior vocation, not a selected career. A poem is a highly personal opening of experience which could not have been written by anyone else, not quite in that way, with that cadence, that image, that peculiar specificity of language. Emily Dickinson represents, superbly, this aspect of the poet's work as individual, almost idiosyncratic, perception and interpretation, however precarious:

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.

I knew but not the next
Would be my final inch –
This gave me that precarious Gait
Some call Experience.[1]

The word 'experience' in this poem denotes an obfuscating abstraction hiding the appalling varieties of individual life which it is the poet's exacting work not only to map, but also to incarnate in language, to make available to our collective imaginative life. For Emily Dickinson to be, to exist (ex – sistere), *to stand out,* is to step diffidently into a cosmic immensity that involves the imminent possibility of death.

The work is to find one's own voice, the voice which utters precisely the individuality of vision – or if not vision, dislocation, disjuncture, disorientation – giving it cognitive shape and expressive form. In the

broadest sense it is an educational labour. The struggle – always restless and forever incomplete – is to recognize, often through the act of writing, in the frustrating tussle with language, the nature of the feeling, the nature of the sensation, the nature of the state of consciousness. It demands a remarkable authenticity of being. T.S Eliot called the English poet William Blake 'a man born without a mask'. For there are times when one would rather not know one's own thoughts and feelings, when one would rather adopt a mask, seek refuge in the collective banalities of the age, in the easy distractions of counterfeit comfort, in what Heidegger called *das Man.*[2]

Part of the exacting work of the poet is to annihilate the mind's protective defences and to silence the seductive voices of what others would like to hear, the clamorous expectations of the zeitgeist.

There is a story told by the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, of a doctor who has just lost his loved one. In a state of grief verging on dementia, he wanders out of his town and comes to a small hamlet. There the doctor goes into the church and finds himself seeking consolation from the minister. The minister listens and is full of compassion. However, he finally admits he cannot help but claims he knows of a book which many of his parishioners, in a state of acute mourning, have found an invaluable support. He takes a volume off the shelf and holds it out to the stricken doctor. The man stares at it, disbelievingly, and says; 'Ah, no. That will not help. You see, I myself am the author.'

For writers this is an uncomfortable story. I am wanting to see writing as an existential labour and am implying an inexpungeable subjective element in all significant creation. Unlike the doctor's book on mourning, there should be a living – if highly complex and often refracted – connection between the person writing and the poem written, between the author struggling and the artefact made. This position sharply contrasts with T.S. Eliot's; in *Tradition and The Individual Talent* Eliot claimed that 'the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality'.[3] I think this is neither possible, nor desirable. The very idiom of the artistic work retains the unique impress of its creator. (That is why in the visual arts we talk of a *Picasso,* a *Chagall,* a *Rembrandt,* and why most conceptual art fails to convince and seems utterly soulless, literally machine-made, machine-fabricated.) In the work of Emily Dickinson *her* unmistakeable idiom is marked by the telegrammatic line, the erratic use of capitals, quirky use of the hyphen, extreme verbal condensation and the all but breathless brevity of the utterance.

A fine modern example of this existential element in poetry would be Ted Hughes' *'*Wodwo*'*, a poem which, written in Hughes' intense and graphic idiom, begins with the question 'What am I?' and continues

exploring the radical uncertainties of this animal – 'I seem / separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped/ out of nothing casually' … Hughes concludes:

… I am the exact centre
but there's all this what is it roots
roots roots roots and here's the water
again very queer but I'll go on looking[4]

Above all, Wodwo is a dazed animal caught in some elemental quest, a symbolic representation of the author's being.

The linguistic dimension

So poetry should be existentially grounded, possess the quality of a compelling personal integrity. But the poet must also be deeply aware of the medium in which he or she works: language. I see this as the second element of the poetic engagement. All good poets are naive philologists in the original sense of that word – they are *lovers of words.* One recalls John Keats who, even as a child, had such a creative and playful relationship to language. A Mrs Grafty claimed that as a small boy instead of answering questions put to him, he would always make up a rhyme to resonate with the last word spoken, laughing with pleasure as he did so. And then in the last anguished months of his short life he brought the same verbal playfulness to hold back the ordeal of suffering, so as not to be a burden on others: summoning up, as he said, 'more puns in a sort of desperation in one week than in any year of my life'.[5]

Poets are the votaries of language. They are in love with its music, its multiple significations, its etymologies.

Now language is informed by, at least, three distinct functions:

Denotation
Connotation
Cadence

As poetry is language, animated to the highest degree, it follows that poetry must integrate these three powers to the greatest possible intensity in relationship to the purpose of the poem. The work of the poet is to drive all three elements into a single compelling constellation. Adapting a magnificent line from Gerard Manley Hopkins I would suggest that 'the significant poem is charged with the grandeur of language'.

Inevitably, many poems fail this high synthesis: they may denote without

cadence (too many poems, these days, seem little more than moralistic or political tags written on the page in broken lines of prose; politically correct tags as heavy as lead) or they connote without meaning (like, it seems to me, some of Dylan Thomas' poems that are diffusely suggestive but seem to be entirely devoid of cognitive significance) or they have cadence without sense (like kinetic poetry, now currently enjoying a certain vogue).

Of course, much critical analysis could be done here. But my general point is simple. The poet has to truly love the language out of which poems are made. A poem is not an encoded message, nor is it an idea set to metre. It is a unique linguistic creation. It calls for a pitched, almost painful, sensitivity to the potencies of syntax, concept, association, metaphor and cadence. Yet there is a dilemma here. Can we really talk about 'the grandeur of language' in our times when, for a multiplicity of interacting reasons, the language is so exhausted, so polluted, when all affirmation sounds only like advertising hyperbole? Indeed is poetry, in the way I have described it, possible today? Can it be written? Perhaps to ask for grandeur is to ask too much?

Here, I think, we can learn from the poet Paul Celan who worked to cleanse the German language from the toxins left by Fascism. In his difficult, labyrinthine, musical poems he all but decomposed and reconstituted the German language in order to express his own nuances, his existential meanings, his own profoundly oppositional understanding. In his poems the distortion of conventional syntax, the employment of gaps, the brevity, the occlusions and the silences (his idiom has a certain affinity with Emily Dickinson's whose work he translated into German) are frayed attempts to utter what the dominant language had made all but unsayable.

In one of his speeches Paul Celan said:

> Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all.[6]

The word 'enriched' *is* the affirmative word. The following poem is a personal attempt to express in English something of what I think Celan is doing. (For a more literal translation of the poem 'Psalm' and for the original poem in German the reader should consult *Paul Celan: Selected Poems* edited by Michael Hamburger.)

Psalm

No-one can create us again out of the dust.
No-one.

Never.

Hallowed be thy name, No-one.
Who is not in Heaven.

Not the Power.

Nor the Glory.

For your sake
We live and flower.

We are not roses –
Our stamens broken,
Our stems blood red.

Not in the beginning.

Nor in the end.

Flowering now and for never,
Without

Amen.[7]

I think contemporary poets may be able to learn from the example of Celan. For today's corrupt language can be undermined, taken down into unexpected depths, washed in the darkness and brought to a kind of grandeur that transcends. And, no doubt, any such grandeur will, at times, sound disconcertingly ambiguous for it will have to be an 'enrichment' which, like Celan's, has taken into its own form the terror of absolute negation and the power of silence.

In spite of all appearances, the task of writing poetry has never been more in question, more difficult, more at the edge.

The cultural dimension

The third element of the poet's work relates to seeing the task as collaborative, of feeling that there *is* a long tradition to be read and raided, to be taken forward *in extremis*. In the present state of cultural dissipation an inner connection to a larger symbolic world is essential for the imaginative life. It is no accident that Ted Hughes' animal Wodwo is taken from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or that the source of Celan's poem is biblical.

However, tradition is far too stolid and stable a word for what I mean; I would rather talk about *the dynamic field in which literature lives.* In a recent book *Against the Flow*[8] I put the general case like this:

Any real poetics in Europe – and that is where we live – must be mapped inside a remarkable culture that goes back and back; from T.S.Eliot and Paul Celan and Mandelstam, through Coleridge and Goethe, through Shakespeare and Dante to Ovid, Sappho and Homer – and the shamans and myth-makers before them. There can be no escaping the tradition for, again and again, an individual word will carry ancient poetic sediment and one of the poet's tasks – as language is the poet's medium – is to shake the hidden pollen and seeds that lie there, to allow for a new and quite unexpected fertilisation. An endless linguistic resurrection! Not to work the deep geology of language is to fail the medium.

We should envisage Sappho, Dante, Shakespeare and Dickinson as our corrective contemporaries. This frees us, at once, from the blinding oppression of fashion and the jangle of journalistic tags. Keeping such good company also constantly challenges our range.

Paradoxically, such a 'tradition' can offer a means to get closer to the raw feel of contemporary experience, without sounding glib or merely rhetorical. The works of the past provide a repertoire of protagonists and narratives which may allow the poet to view *imaginatively* the betrayals and the brute violence of our times. Michael Longley in his celebrated poem 'Ceasefire' by employing Homer's account of the meeting of Hector and Achilles in *The Iliad* is able the more effectively to broach the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. In this poem Homer's narrative offers a distancing frame for the moving contemplation of contemporary suffering.

In a similar manner I adapted the opening of Canto Three from Dante's *Inferno* to try to capture what I saw as the cultural barbarism of the time, in 1992:

Dante to Virgil at the Entrance to Hell

And so we came to that place unrecorded in books
Or maps; not found in archives or libraries.
The night smouldered without stars. At times
It was so dark I could see nothing. On all sides
There rose gagged screams, muffled sighs;
A mixture of filth, insinuation, jargon, lies.
Be economical with the truth, one says. Another cries:
Humanity, what is that? Tears pricked my eyes.
And all the time a blizzard scoured the place;
A million grains of sand blistered my face.
Master, I said, *For Christ's sake who are these men?*
The answer came at once. *They are the nation's scum,*
Which rises quickly. They are maggots that worm
Their way through venison. Survivors, to the end;
Who learning the art of words become the masters of deceit;
Yet are always silent when it serves them well.
Observe them closely. For we are at the entrance into hell.
It was then I saw that banner whipping the wind,
Zig-zagging as it swirled, now *Left,* now *Right,*
Now *Low*, now *High.* Such a mob followed on –
Who would have thought death had undone so many?
From their blotched faces blood streamed to the ground
Where bloated worms rose up, to gulp it down.[9]

The poem, like Michael Longley's, is a form of re-telling, a way of putting the great literary work of the past to new uses. It is, of course, only one obvious way in which the contemporary poet can work the field of literature. In fact, the influence of other historic work is *always* there, often in the most subtle way, beating in the syntax, adding another layer of meaning to a metaphor or further animating a particular word.

That the voices of this literary tradition are growing fainter each day in our technocratic global culture poses a real problem for the poet. This, indeed, lies at the heart of the current crisis of poetry. But without this vast echo-chamber of multiple cadence, resonant with the verbal creation of centuries, there can be no significant poetry – only a one-dimensional whittering.

The metaphysical dimension

I have often thought that the real value of art is that it creates embodied

representations of life for our contemplation, both for our aesthetic pleasure and our inner renewal. We should not, in an age of unparalleled trivia and vaunted mediocrity, give up on this vivifying notion. If we yield the high ground, what have we left: an empty formalism, entertainment, verbal quips for passing occasions, Polonius-like platitudes, the seductions of advertising? To concede here is to compose our epitaph.

In the 'Ninth Elegy' of the *Duino Elegies* Rilke wrote:

> *Now* is the time for telling, *here* is the place.
> Speak and testify. More than ever
> those things we have lived with are falling away…
> but our hearts fight back, living
> between the hammers, and our tongues
> sing on between our teeth, in spite
> of everything, singing and praising.[10]

Poets have little choice but to live between the menacing hammers, still labouring to utter the multiform truths of our being *here*, of our being *now,* thus keeping open through the power of language and the continuous resurrection of 'tradition' the creative possibilities of consciousness. This I would name the metaphysical task of poetry.

The word 'metaphysical' can easily be misunderstood. I do not use the word to refer to a body of supernatural truths which can be scanned through the power of reason, but rather to describe our predicament as human beings; through our powers of symbolising we lift ourselves out of nature and become enigmas to ourselves. The metaphysical begins with this dilemma: who are we? how do we belong? what can we create out of our puzzling natures? The question that Wodwo asks is the perennial metaphysical question: what am I? And the answer that he gives is in no way doctrinal but a matter of orientation: *I'll go on looking.* Nothing is certain in this realm, but everything in our lives may rest on the answers we hazard. In my view, significant poetry has to grapple with this huge question of meaning or, rather, *the possibility of meaning*. At times it amounts to no more than the task of witnessing what seems absent. In the following poem from my recent volume, *Viva la Vida,* the fox carries the projection of the missing god.

Red Fox

What were we looking for? Each morning as the train raced
Between urban stations – disused, vandalized – we watched
The fields glide by. Patches of chemical green, withered marsh,

Scarred land. From the window we scanned the margins,
Impatient to claim whatever stricken life ran at the edges –
To catch the red fox sprinting reckless under spiked iron ledges,

Its tail scorching tinder ground. And momentarily we caught him
In his new habitat, loping by a scree of cars, a metal mound,
A smouldering stream or suspended between action, his green eyes

Staring, his paws reading the raw braille of the broken earth.
Gone almost before seen – like a sudden image come to birth
In a deep-sleep dream … *Fox! Fox!* We shouted – only to witness

The trauma of his absence. But his rank beauty entered us,
Taunted our tamed hours, haunted us like a god – lost
In that corroded hinterland. Yet radiant still. *Deus absconditus.*[11]

Poetry's task is to burn, blow and make us new. But also, at times, to perplex and unsettle us, to keep us unstable and open to change. In both roles, positive and negative, it is the arch-enemy of the one dimensional consumer society we now inhabit.

Notes and references

1 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1957) ed Thomas Johnson, New York, Little Brown and Company.
2 *Das Man.* This is Heidegger's coinage meaning, literally, the 'one' or the 'they'; the one who does what 'one' should do, the one who conforms, the 'they-self'.
3 See *Selected Prose of T.S.Eliot* (1975) ed. Frank Kermode, Faber and Faber.
4 'Wodwo' is the concluding poem in *Wodwo* (1967), Ted Hughes, Faber and Faber.
5 Both these details concerning Keats' life are recorded in *John Keats: a Life* (1995), Stephen Coote, Hodder and Stoughton.
6 See *Paul Celan: Collected Prose (*1999), translated by Rosmarie Waldrop, Carcanet.
7 *Personae and Other Selected Poems* (1995), Peter Abbs, Skoob Books
8 *Against the Flow: Education, the Arts and Postmodern Culture* (2003), Peter Abbs, RoutledgeFalmer.
9 Op cit.
10 From *The Duino Elegies,* Rainer Maria Rilke translated by Leslie Norris and Alan Keele (1993), Camden House.
11 From *Viva la Vida* (2005), Peter Abbs, Salt. www.saltpublishing.com

Songs and Dreams as Sources of Poetry

This next piece is about how inspiration and the creative process of writing a poem works. It is written by **Steven O'Brien**, a poet of Irish/Welsh origins, brought up in Sussex, whose first collection, ***Dark Hill Dreams***, much admired by Irish Poet, Brendan Kennelly, was published this year by ***Agenda Editions*** (£8.99. Order from The Wheelwrights, Fletching Street, Mayfield, East Sussex TN20 6TL, tel. 01435 873703, or by email: editor@agendapoetry.co.uk)

Poetry advances where ordinary reality falters
(Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*)

Many Irish songs and stories speak of the ragged outcast Rapparee: a fallen nobleman of the Gaelic aristocracy, turned outlaw. The beginning of my poem called 'I Sing the Rapparee' goes as follows:

In the eyes-closed ache of the song
He jags in my vision,
Sudden against the skyline.
Hounded youth –
The Rapparee.

I catch the shattered cut of him
As he hares across
The crow-mobbed sodden hillside of the tune.
Russet jacket rags
Flap and part
To show a winter thicket of ribs
And a shot-out heart.

This one image lies at the core of my poem: the hunted man with the shot out heart. I experienced this as a waking dream. I had been wrestling with ideas for poems. I sat through most of Sunday writing lines and not getting anywhere with them. I had no subject, or central idea in my mind. I was teaching full-time and Sundays were the only time I could devote to writing. I went to bed late, knowing that I had to be up early in the morning.

I dreamed of a man scurrying and running in light rain across a near vertical, green mountainside. He was wearing a tattered jacket, and he had black, wet hair. He seemed to be about thirty. At one point, almost as if I had zoomed in to him, in a cinematographic shot, I was suddenly

very close to him. I found myself looking up at him, from a position of about three feet lower down the steep slope. He stopped still for an instant, although his chest was heaving from much running. He did not look at me and did not appear to be aware of my presence. As his jacket parted in the wind, I looked at his chest and stomach. I saw that, instead of ribs, his frame was made of wicker-work, like the underside of a woven basket. It was also like looking through a copse thicket, or wintry hedge, as there were dry leaves clinging to the twigs. However there was a shattered hole in the centre of his chest and I knew that this man had been shot. I saw that there was an empty space where his heart should be. I could catch glimpses of the back of his jacket through the tangle. I knew, in the sudden, emphatic way knowledge comes in a dream, that this man was at the same time both alive and dead.

In the instant of his halting I was aware only of his tall, thin image, the wind like fluttering ribbons and the creaking of his wicker-thicket ribcage, as he gasped for breath. He turned his head and ran up the mountain to the ridge. I saw in his eyes a last expression of desperate panic, as he scanned the horizon. Then he was gone. Then I heard, far off, the baying of many hounds coming unseen from over the peaks behind me. Suddenly I, too, was running and filled with fear. I ran up the mountain, just as the man had done, and on to a rock-strewn plateau. But he was gone and I did not see him again.

Now I had the feeling that the pack was after me and that I had to escape at all costs. It became one of those terrible dream sequences when one runs and runs, but it is never fast or far enough to escape the pursuers. Finally, I climbed over broken walls and hid in the ruins of a tumbled stone house. I too was now gasping for breath and wet through with rain and sweat. I looked out from behind the chimney stack to see the hounds throng through a gap in the low wall. They did not seem to notice me. Instead they took a scent and their cries pitched around the stones, as they poured straight past where I was hiding. I knew that they were chasing the man with the shot-out heart. There were no human pursuers. I was left looking out over the green plateau through gaps in the grey walls. And there the dream ended.

I awoke and knew instantly that I had been dreaming of the Rapparee. There was no doubt about it in my mind. I knew enough songs and stories to piece together that my dream of flight and pursuit had been about the hunted Irish outlaw. It was one of those intense and complex dreams that stay with one long into waking.

In *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, Bachelard states, ‘The image-producing forces of our mind develop along two very different lines. The first take wing when confronted by the new. The other forces which

produce images plumb the depths of being. There they seek at once the primitive and eternal'.

The new forces which produced the images of setting in the poem were immediately apparent to me. I had recently returned from a visit to my wife's family home in County Limerick. I recognised the mountainside in my dream, from a walk we took, one day in the rain, with my wife's cousin. There is a steep slope and summit called Barna, which forms the beginning of the uplands of Limerick. The setting of my dream was the top of Barna, or a place just like it. On our walk along the plateau we were shown the ruins of cottages vacated in the famine of the 1840s. There were a tumble of grey stones, grassy mounds and a few upstanding structures, which were explained as the ruins of chimneys. These are the 'strewn walls' of my poem.

Sullen black cattle stood, blank-eyed, and still in the desolation, as shifts of rain drifted across the remnants. The cottages looked to have been very small, tiny even. I stood in the gap and touched both empty spaces where walls would have stood. We spoke of the hard lives of subsistence, parcels of divided land, and large families in cramped cabins. The endless mean struggle, with only buttermilk and potatoes to eat, and when the potato failed, nothing.

Nothing but *An Górta Mór* – The Great Hunger.

On the way down, against the wind and rain, we spoke of the famine, telling over again stories that had been passed down to us, through the conduit of generations. Sharp flints of suffering, worked by tongues, into smooth, commonly held stones. We spoke of mass evictions, and the roof thatch torched by the landlords'men. Of the corn, gold and ripe, in the landlords' fields and mothers lying in ditches, their mouths stained green, from eating grass. Of dead babies at their dry breasts. Of glutted crows over broken fields. Of skeletal men walking the land, beyond hope, until they fell. Of a million dead, and two million fled across the wide ocean. And the ruins we had left behind on Barna seemed to serve as an equinoctial point for the familiar currency we shared. I remember I found myself singing lines from the old song 'Skibbereen':

> Oh father dear and I often hear
> You speak of Erin's isle
> Her valleys green her lofty scenes
> Her mountains rude and wild
> They say it is a lovely land
> In which a prince might dwell
> Then why did you abandon it
> The reason to me tell…

Below Barna, at the home of my wife's uncle, we were shown a massive and twisted old oak tree on the roadside, which is known locally as the '*Hanging Tree*', its large bough having been used for public executions in the penal days. On another uncle's farm we were told how he had found two skeletons while he was digging out an old sand-pit. The remains were sent to Dublin and the results of the tests revealed them to have been of a mother and teenage daughter, both victims of the famine.

I remember sitting quietly in the old cottage that night. My wife and I listened to the rain pelting the windows. I thought of the stories of the famine and old songs of rebels; the broken houses, and a few wet fields away, the two lonely graves. I thought too of Liam O Maonlaí's mournful singing of Peatsi O'Callanán's lament *White Potatoes*, which dates from the time of the Hunger;

A thousand farewells to the white potatoes
For as long as we had them, a pleasant hoard
Affable innocent, coming into our company
As they laughed at the head of the board.

They were help to the nurse, to the man and the child,
To the weak and the strong, to the young and the old
But the cause of my sorrow, my grief, my affliction
Them rolling away, without frost, without cold.

What will buy a shroud for those to be buried?
Tobacco, pipes or a coffin of wood?
And, of course, it would be a release if we could.

I went and stood in the open doorway and looked into the blackness, thinking of the shivering Rapparee, tattered, and soaked., crouching under tumbled stones, gnawing a putrid potato. His cutlass blunt, his shelmalier musket a rusty relic. This all occurred weeks before my dream. Now when I consider Bachelard's thoughts on the image-producing forces, I am minded of the assault of the past on the present that occurred in my few days in Limerick. In 'Stations of the West', Heaney writes, 'all around me seemed to prophesy'. In those days, I too felt the landscape and the past prophesying vividly to me. And although there was no immediate poetry, my mind must have been primed by all that I had seen or heard around Barna. However, unlike Heaney and his rootedness, my journey into Irish culture has always been through the myths at the heart of old songs, and as the poem first began to lodge itself on that Monday morning,

it was the fabulous and harsh mythic elements of the dream which fired my imagination the most. To me, this is what Bachelard intends when he comments on the 'primitive and eternal'.

Before breakfast and work, I wrote some lines down in a fast and rough way. The lines I sketched were those which reflected the most disturbing part of the dream: the central, perplexingly surreal image of a man, at once alive and dead, with a cage of twigs for ribs. They have been revised slightly, but they still perform as the imaginative kindling at the core of the finished poem

> Russet jacket rags
>
> Flap and part
>
> To show a winter thicket of ribs
> And a shot-out heart.

These lines have changed very little from those I wrote on the first morning of the poem's inception. 'Russet' was a word added in a later draft. The fact remains that whatever the poem's strengths may be, for me, the poem arose from this vivid, shocking dream. The wider implications of the dream on my poetry were a long time coalescing. However, I have come to see the poem as both the beacon from which all the poetry I have written over the last six years emanates, and also the magnet to which many of my images are held by attractive force.

Thus 'I Sing the Rapparee' contains themes which evolve and manifest themselves in later poems. Enchantment figures are an ingredient in the most intense of my poems. Strong archetypal figures surface in poems about my mother, my sister, the Guy Fawkes group and the poems concerning the Prophet. They are all outsiders, strangers, hunted. To employ an Old Saxon term – they are all held under some terrible wyrd. A famished anomie burns in their restless eyes.

Linked to this is the violence of many of my poems, with recurrent ideas of sacrifice, brutality and martyrdom. There is also a close relationship with the process of singing and of the songs themselves, which appears in poems such as *Josef Locke, Duende* and *I Will not Pity*. Finally, there is a constant tension of exploring the rawness of emotion which comes close to, but hopefully never crosses over, the line of sentiment.