

Introduction: Poetry and transfiguration: Reading for a new vision

To read a good poem well is to have your vision restored. Encounter at depth with good poetry allows you to see truths you have been missing and restores and redresses a balance our age has lost. As the Nobel prize winner Seamus Heaney puts it poetry "offers a clarification, a fleeting glimpse of a potential order of things "beyond confusion", a glimpse that has to be its own reward." The purpose of this book is to enter into those transformations of vision offered us by some of the great poems of the past and of our own age so that we can see things in a new way, a way which offers to restore some of the faith and hope which is missing from our culture.

1) What must poetry restore?

If we ask why the modern Western culture has lost this life-enhancing vision, why there is an imbalance that needs to be redressed, we have to look back to the great cultural shift that occurred during the Enlightenment which ushered in a mistrust of and marginalisation of imaginative and poetic vision which had very far-reaching effects. Instead of acknowledging, as many thinkers do now, that the *way we know, the language through which we know*, is part of knowledge itself, philosophers of the Enlightenment thought that image and imagination simply clouded and obscured the pure dry knowledge which they were after, and so they tried, in the words of Thomas Sprat, writing as it were the manifesto of the age, in his History of the Royal Society:

to separate the knowledge of *Nature*, from the colours of *Rhetoric*, the devices of *Fancy* or the delightful deceit of *Fables*.

This is in very sharp contrast to the wisdom of the previous age which was rooted in the idea that fables, stories and myths were the medium which most completely embodied the deepest truths we need to know, so that most of the wisdom of the ancient world as well as to the Judaeo-Christian tradition was in fact embodied in myth story and song. The notion of telling a fable in order to get at a truth went very deep indeed, and emerges for example even in the light-hearted exchange between Audrey and Touchstone the fool in *As You Like It*, though it should be said that Shakespeare, with a true understanding of the cross, always puts his greatest wisdom in the mouths of his fools:

Audrey: I do not know what 'poetical' is. Is it honest in deed and word? Is it a true thing?

Touchstone: No, truly; for the truest poetry is the most feigning..."

But the attack is not only on story but on the poetry of image and metaphor, Sprat goes on to demand:

"a close, naked, natural way of speaking, positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness, bringing all things as near the mathematical -plainness as they can, and preferring the language of the artisans, countrymen and merchants before that of wits and scholars"

These men had declared war on the imagination and in the treaty at the end of that war there was a kind of cultural apartheid. The entire realm of "objective" truth was to be the exclusive terrain of *Reason* at its narrowest and the faculties of *Imagination* and *Intuition* were only relevant to a purely private and "subjective" truth. If it can't be weighed and measured, these men were saying, it's not really there. How prophetic Blake, the great rebel against this division was, when he wrote in *A vision of Judgement*:

"What it will be Question'd, "when the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea?" O no, no, I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty."

2) The Effect of Enlightenment on Faith

It was not just poetry that was under attack. This new arrangement affected everything, including the Christian faith, which was forced to choose, either to be relegated to something subjective, not there, essentially made up, or to become a pseudo-science, reducing the great mysteries, embedded in the ancient story-telling of scripture, to quantifiable exactitudes, patient only of a literal interpretation. Theology has become divided between increasingly vague and amorphous liberalism, happy to keep re-inventing the faith, and an increasingly strident fundamentalism which tries to treat the vast subtle poem of scripture as a single scientific treatise whose every word is literally and *only literally* true.

3)The Present Opportunity

We live, however, in the midst of another wave of change. That old enlightenment apartheid is crumbling as surely as political apartheid. The gap is being closed. We are seeking to know and understand in new ways and at last we can call the poets who have kept faith, who have not lost hope, back to our aid. For before, during, and after this great divide the poets have continued to guide us through the neglected kingdoms, as preservers and interpreters of a unifying truth. They have kept and told the stories that bind us to life and brought our attention back again and again, like Blake in his *Vision*, to those realities the Enlightenment could not see. But how do poets change the way we see, and what kind of new vision is it they offer?

Shakespeare set poetry the comparatively modest task of "holding a mirror up to nature," that is, helping

us to see our society and ourselves more clearly, reflecting our known realities back to us. But sometimes, (and very often in the works of Shakespeare), the mirror of poetry does more than reflect what we have already seen. For sometimes that mirror becomes a window, a window into the Mystery, which is both in, and beyond nature, a casement opening on perilous seas. From that window sometimes shines an unearthly light that suddenly transforms, transfigures all the earthly things it falls upon. Through that window, when it is opened for us by the poet's art, we catch a glimpse of that Beauty always ancient always new, Who made and kindled our imagination in the beginning and Whose love draws us beyond the world.

It is those moments of transfiguration, those moments when the mirror a poem holds up becomes a window into the Divine, which are the subject of this book. My hope is that we will approach poetry, not all by any means avowedly Christian poetry, in such a way that we have this double vision, this experience of transfiguration, of seeing through and beyond, which the poet-priest George Herbert described so simply:

A man that looks on glass

on it may stay his eye

or if he pleases through it pass

and then the heavens espy.

4) **Two poems as key to themes**

To help us recover this vision we are going to begin by reading two poems, which will help us to reflect on the nature of poetry itself, and on how to read it. The poems, which I have chosen for us to start with, span the gap of which I have spoken. George Herbert's poem *Prayer* comes from one who saw, at the threshold of the modern world, the coming danger of a false and fragmented knowledge (as we shall see when we come later in this book to read his poem *Vanitie*) and in his verse he continuously and deliberately wove together the strands of Reason, Faith and Imagination to make a triple cord which not even the coming cultural-shift could break. Seamus Heaney, in *Rain Stick*, from *The Spirit Level*, written in the final decade of the twentieth century, shows us the wonderful way in our "post-modern" world, the old unity of vision, the ancient window on mystery, can be suddenly and beautifully re-opened.

So let us begin where we are, in our own age and read this astonishing poem, finding in it the keys to doorways into the poetry of every age:

Upend the rain stick and what happens next
Is a music that you never would have known
To listen for. In a cactus stalk

Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash
Come flowing through. You stand there like a pipe
Being played by water, you shake it again lightly

And diminuendo runs through all its scales
Like a gutter stopping trickling. And now here comes
A sprinkle of drops out of the freshened leaves,

Then subtle little wets off grass and daisies;
Then glitter-drizzle, almost-breaths of air.
Upend the stick again. What happens next

Is undiminished for having happened once,
Twice, ten, a thousand times before.
Who cares if all the music that transpires

Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?
You are like a rich man entering heaven

Through the ear of a raindrop. Listen now again

1) water imagery

The first thing to strike the reader (and I hope the listener, for this is a poem which demands to be read aloud,) is the sheer particular vividness of the myriad water images which fall like a cataract through the mind and like the very sounds of refreshing water upon the ear:

Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash

have in their rhythmic and repeated *w* and *sh* the very sound of the water sloshing and washing as it runs down and backs up against itself, and then the new half line that ends the sentence:

come flowing through.

itself expresses the sudden clearing of a channel or passage that lets the water flow through smoothly and quietly again. The phrases and images build to a compendium of all that one has ever enjoyed in the many forms of water from the sluice-rush, through trickles and sprinkle, to the beautifully observed detail of "subtle little wets off grass and daisies."

Such rich imagery demands a slow and succulent reading a tasting of the words as they flow, and this celebration of the very words and sounds as good in themselves, and this more engaged way of reading is one of the ways of approaching poetry which we shall consider later.

2) Refreshment from the dry:

After this first sense of the refreshing variety of water the reader then feels all the more powerfully the creative tension between, *downpour sluice-rush, spillage and backwash* and the phrase which precedes it. *In a cactus stalk*. Some of this poem's power to move us is generated by the polarity and counterpoint between the world of images that lie behind the little seed-like words *grit, dry, cactus*, and all the lush water sounds which emerge from this dry cactus. It is this awareness of tension or polarity which moves us towards the heart of the poem, which is the paradox of refreshment from the dry. Not simply of this moment of water music from the cactus, but of every experience in life when there is a sudden blessing from barrenness, a hope from despair, a grace at the zero point. And in that sense this poem is certainly about poetry itself. In his book of essays *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney, commenting on a poem of Robert Frost's says that poetry: " provides a draught of the clear water of transformed understanding and fills the reader with a momentary sense of freedom and wholeness.", which is certainly what is happening by the time we reach the invitation at the end of this poem to be like one who enters Heaven through the

ear of a raindrop.

3) challenge to scientism

When once we have been ushered by the poet into this realm of paradox we begin to notice other things through the lens of his poem. We see that it is written as a deliberate challenge to the "scientism", the reductive way of seeing things in terms only of what can be weighed and measured, of measuring the dry context of a mystery and then saying that your measurements are *all* it is. The scientist says *all* you have heard is the fall of dry seeds through a cactus, but the poet replies:

Who cares if all the music that transpires

Is the fall of grit or dry seeds through a cactus?

You are like a rich man entering heaven

Through the ear of a raindrop.

And as we hear the poem's music and through it the music of water springing miraculously from the desiccated, we know that the poem in fact describes what *really* happens, which is more than the bare accuracy of science's "fall of grit and dry seeds".

4)Theme of music

This emergence of the music of water from the dry and desiccated prepares us for another great theme of this poem which is music itself, not only heard music but a deeper music "you never would have known to listen for". The poem begins and ends with the injunction to *listen*, and once the ear is attuned to this theme it catches the catena of words and images drawn from the world of music:

...listen...pipe being played...diminuendo runs through all its scales...almost breaths of air...undiminished...entering heaven through the ear...

the double senses of water and music in many of these phrases is beautifully achieved especially after the phrase pipe being played has delicately suggested to the mind the image perhaps of a flute, then the phrase *almost breaths of air*, which is first about the fresh air in a garden after rain, at the same time, just as delicately, conjures the wonderful breathy sound the flute can make.

5) Perspective shift

At the heart of this musical theme comes one of those sudden shifts of perspective whereby the poets shake us to a new understanding. For the first few lines of the poem we are *outside* the instrument, holding and upending the dry stalk, listening for its music, then comes the image of it as a water pipe down which the water is sluicing and rushing, and then suddenly it is we ourselves who *are* the pipe, we are being played:

You stand there like a pipe

being played by water.

In this sudden shift you get that entering into experience, that coalescing of observer and observed, which was so dreadfully and dryly missing from the enlightenment perspective.

6) Repetition

As we read it and enjoy it again we discover that it is also a poem about *repetition*, about the relation between the outer repetitions in time and the inner experience in eternity. It is a poem of hope, and realism for it does not suggest as some romantics and false mystics have, that the moment of revelation when the transfiguring light of heaven falls through the window of an experience, is a one-off, never to be caught again, always to be sought, but never accessible. Quite the reverse. This poem comes to a wonderful revelation of the divine *in* the regular:

Upend the stick again. What happens next

Is undiminished for having happened once,

Twice, ten, a thousand times before.

7) Sacrament

And so this poem is also about sacrament. I read it and it reflects for me my experience as a Christian coming to Communion, as a priest celebrating Communion. The plain little wafer is as dry as those falling seeds, the daily wine and water are all repeated, "once twice, ten a thousand times" and yet from them also, undiminished, comes the refreshing flow from the fountain of Life Himself.

And finally, because it is about sacrament, this poem is about entering heaven, as Heaney delicately alludes to one of the hard sayings of Jesus and releases from it somehow an unexpected grace. The eye of the needle through which he must enter in Christ's saying, becomes in this poem, in a strange and

beautiful conflation of images, *the ear of a raindrop*. In this image we both hear the music of water and see for an instant how the curved reflective surface of the droplet seems to hold the whole world. However the world it contains is not a mere reflection of our own, but a wholly new one. The mirror held up to nature, has become a window, the window has become a gateway through which we may enter as the last lines invite us again to enter into the mystery through listening to the music of the rainstick through the music of the poem:

You are like a rich man entering heaven

Through the ear of a raindrop. Listen now again.

Herbert's Prayer

We turn now to a poem of George Herbert's. In a later chapter we will be looking at his poetry in much more detail, but we will anticipate a little as there are themes and motifs in this poem, as in the rainstick, which will be germane to the reading of other poems and poets in this book. The best way to enter into this particular poem is to let its amazing cascade of images simply wash over us and refresh our imagination. We should not try to stop and analyse yet, just let the images flow on from one another rather like Heaney's downpour sluice-rush spillage and backwash.:

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,

Gods breath in man returning to his birth,

The Soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,

The Christian Plummet sounding heav'n and earth;

Engine against th'Almightie, sinners tower

Reversed Thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,

The six-daies world-transposing in an houre,

A kind of tune which all things hear and fear;

softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,

Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,

Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,

The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,

Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,

The land of spices; something understood.

1) Cascade of images

Our first impression is of the sheer wealth, almost over-abundance of beautiful images, contained in striking and memorable phrases we are being offered. This is not the honing and concentration on the single vision, but a kind of rainbow refraction of many sights, a scattering of many seeds broadcast.

2) Each image the seed of a poem

For each of these images is in its own way a little poem, or the seed of a poem, ready to grow and unfold in the readers mind. And the different seeds take root at different times, falling differently in the soil of the mind each time one returns to this poem. I have been reading it for a quarter of a century now and I still find its images springing up freshly in my mind and showing me new things. For the purpose of this Introduction we will delve in and examine four of these little seeds, these poems in themselves within the images, before we take a wider view and see how they all fit together in the larger poem itself.

3) The images

i) *Prayer the churches banquet*. This opening phrase carries, with the choice of the word *banquet*, a picture not of some puritan modicum, some strict or grudging allowance of necessity, but rather of largesse, generosity, the good measure of a royal occasion. It's a phrase which sets the poem's tone, for of course a *banquet* is exactly what Herbert gives us; course after course, and layer after layer, of nourishing images. In fourteen lines he heaps up twenty-seven different images of the experience of prayer. But the phrase *churches banquet* alludes to and summons up the rich complex of feast and banquet imagery in Scripture and the Church's life. Behind this passage lies the covenant meal of the Old Testament, the great wedding feast with which Jesus so often compared the kingdom, to which we must bring ourselves "*well drest*", but most importantly the Last Supper and through it the Holy Communion

which is the foretaste of the banquet of heaven, to which, in another of Herbert's poems Love himself bids us welcome.

ii) *God's breath in man returning to his birth*

This line invites us into a very early tradition of prayer and meditation rooted in a reflection on the image of *breath* and *breathing* in the Bible. To understand this line we need first to remember that in Hebrew, Greek and Latin the words for *breath* and *spirit* are one and the same and then to see before us first that primal image in Genesis of God breathing the breath of life into Man, the moment of our wakening as living beings, a moment of tender closeness to our Maker. Then after that *inspiration* comes the equally decisive moment of *expiration*. We have to trace our history through fall and alienation pain and sin and death at last to the foot of the cross where a Second Adam, one in whom also the whole of mankind is bound and involved, stretches out his arms to embrace the pain of the world and *breathes back to God* that gift of life, "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit and he breathed his last". Then we must look beyond the cross, to the resurrection and the renewal of our lives that comes with the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the gospel image of the risen Jesus who "breathed on his disciples" and said "receive the holy spirit". Contained in the story of our breathing is the whole story of our salvation. For a Christian in prayer the very act of breathing can become a return to our birth, a receiving of original life from the breath of God, as we breath in with Adam in the garden of our beginnings, an offering of all that needs letting go and redeeming, as we breath out with Christ on the cross; a glad acceptance of new life in the Holy spirit as we breath in again receiving our life and commission afresh from the risen Lord.

iii) *Engine against th'Almightie, sinners towre*

Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,

This is as an extraordinary clutch of related images, all drawing on pictures of warfare and violence *against* God to describe of part of our relation *with* Him in prayer.

Herbert achieves his effect by a sudden reversal of perspective, much as we saw in the Heaney poem, epitomised here in the phrase *reversed thunder* We think of God in Heaven thundering down on us, but in prayer we are at liberty to thunder back at him as indeed in our desperation we sometimes do and perhaps those are our best prayers. The *Engine* against the Almighty is almost certainly intended to conjure the image of a canon shot at God, since the other engine, the siege tower, is already covered in the phrase *sinners tower*. Herbert uses this image even more explicitly in his poem *Artillery* where he says:

"then we are shooters both and thou dost deign

To enter combat with us and contest,

With thine own clay.

The image of prayer as a form of weaponry is of course rooted in St. Paul's military metaphors but here Herbert has dared to observe that it is not always the devil, but sometimes God himself whom we are fighting, as we struggle with our vocation to full humanity. In compressing this idea into the images of his poem Herbert may have been directed by his memory of a sermon of his friend John Donne:

"Earnest prayer hath the nature of Importunity; Wee presse, wee importune God...Prayer hath the nature of Impudency; wee threaten God in Prayer...and God suffers this Impudency and more. Prayer hath the nature of Violence; in the publique Prayers of the Congregation we besiege God, saies Tertullian, and we take God Prisoner, and bring God to our Conditions; and God is glad to be straightened by us in that siege."

But after the thunders and towers and cannons of the siege imagery, Herbert brings the focus down and sharpens it with that single piercing image: *Christ-side-piercing spear*. We have become the centurion, making that terrible thrust, but this time it is not cold steel but our own agonies which are piercing the heart of Christ.

iv) The six-daies world-transposing in an hour,

A kind of tune, which all things heare and feare;

Transposition is very much what poetry and all literary art is about. To hear snatches from the huge unknowable symphony of experience, to catch them and transpose them to the key and pitch which can resonate with our understanding, so that at some point they harmonise with that unheard melody from heaven we are always trying to hear, that is the purpose of the music in poetry. The transposition here is a taking of the whole story of creation and a reworking of it within our individual life of prayer. Meditating on the six days of creation as a key to understanding ones own place in the order of things was a tradition which had begun for the West with Augustine's beautiful meditation on Genesis at the end of his Confessions. It had been continued in Herbert's age by his older contemporary Lancelot Andrewes whose private devotions were ordered around the governing images derived in each day's creation, and there is a beautiful contemporary example of the *six daies world* transposed literally in *an hour* in a sermon of John Donne's "Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth", taking us symbolically through every step in the worlds making and written to be heard in exactly an hour.

These *transpositions* lead to the making of *a kind of tune* and if this is true of prayer it is also true of

poetry and of this poem for here again is Heaney's "music that you never would have known to listen for".

One might take each of these twenty-seven images in turn and find as much fruit in them: the window on the mysteries of communion in *exalted manna*, all the sense both of life and sacrifice packed into *souls blood*, the evocation of the riches of the enchanted and far away in *land of spices*, and perhaps most tellingly the superb compression and paradox in *Heaven in ordinare*, a phrase which in itself sums up the heart of the Gospel in God's incarnation in a stable, but also stands for the heart of the kind of poetry we will explore in this book. It is precisely the restored vision that sees the ordinary afresh, and allows us to see heaven in it, to be with Blake in *The Auguries of Innocence*;

To see a world in a grain of sand

And a heaven in a wild flower

Hold infinity in the palm of your hand

And eternity in an hour

or as we were with Heaney, to enter heaven through the ear of a raindrop.

4) Integration into poem as whole:

We could meditate further on these individual images but I want to turn now to look at how they are related to each other and to the poem as a whole, for the ability to feel the energy that arises from the forces and tensions within the poem is part of what we need to rediscover in order to enjoy poetry at depth.

5) Congruence and disparity

Looking at the poem as a whole it seems almost modern in the way Herbert allows himself freedom from syntax and logic. The poem is technically a single sentence with only one full stop at the end of it bringing us to a rest after the roller-coaster ride through the images, with the quiescent phrase *something understood*. But it is a strange sentence. There is no main verb. It makes no statement. Its meaning is not carried on the surface of its grammar. It is a world away from Sprat's "bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as we can". No, the meaning of this poem is carried not by the syntax of the sentence, but by the images themselves, by the way image speaks to image in point and counterpoint. For here there is both a *congruence* which gives the poem flow and unity, and also a *disparity* which

gives it tension and energy. There are lines of congruence between *banquet, softness, manna, gladness, well-drest, land of spices*, all suggesting sumptuousness and celebration. There is congruence between the music imagery of *transposing...kind of tune.. and church bells beyond the stares heard*, but there is a power in the tension of a poem which in lines 4 and 5 has the loud violence of *engine against th'almighty* and *reversed thunder* yet has moved in line 9 to *softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss*. At the end of the poem something is understood precisely because the poem has been able to hold these extremes in tension with each other, which is of course exactly what the life of prayer does for the practising Christian.

6) Transposition and Paraphrase

Then there is the whole subtle business across this poem of *transposition* and *paraphrase*, both terms mentioned in the poem itself. The theme of returning to heaven what heaven first gave, which is what prayer essentially is, is transposed across a series of different keys from *breath returning to its birth* through *reversed thunder*, to its fullest expression in *exalted manna*, the offering to God of His own gift in the Eucharist. When Herbert speaks of prayer as *the soul in paraphrase* he is using that term to describe the way in which through prayer we find a new language, a new set of terms in which to express ourselves and in *paraphrasing* ourselves to God in our hour of prayer we are, through the terms of our paraphrase, seeing ourselves afresh in His light. And this in turn is what the poem itself does. Each of the twenty-seven images it offers is itself a paraphrase of the experience of prayer. Between them they offer us a series of new understandings of who we are and what we are doing when we engage in prayer. These notions of *transposition* and *paraphrase* will be a key to understanding much of the poetry we encounter in this book.

7) Paradox and reversal

The other thematic key which we have already noted both in this poem and in *Rain Stick* is paradox and reversal, the sudden setting of things on their heads, the *reversed thunder* here, there, the *up-ending* of the rain stick. Through the break in our world made by the shock of paradox there sometimes flows a new light.

It is the combination of all these things, working together within the subtle unity of the poem which enables us to hear *a kind of tune*, that stirs *The souls blood*, and leads at last as Herbert has intended, to *something understood*.

Having enjoyed these two poems let us see if we can draw out and re-cap from the experience of reading them some methods and approaches to the reading of poetry which we can bring to bear on the other

poems we shall examine in this book. 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 of course not really new but rather a return to a 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:

Five ways into reading:

1) Tasting the Words

Firstly we need to recover a 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

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 lovely name of *Lectio Divina*. The great practitioners and preservers of this art, as of so many other mysteries, were the monks of Europe. They showed it visually in their illuminated manuscripts, and aurally in their 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 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."

For the English Church echoes of this ancient art of reading are preserved in the beautiful Prayer Book Collect on the scriptures with its petition "...Help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn, and *inwardly digest* them... "

Certainly I hope that throughout this book we will have some sense both of the inner nourishment, and, in that beautiful Cistercian image, of waters drawn up from a well to be poured out fruitfully later.

2) **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 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*.

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 tigers 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.

3) **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 speak to one another, 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 great essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* first published in 1919, we must have "a perception, not only 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." and 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."

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"

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:

should n'ere

Have thought that death so many had despoiled

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 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 and sometimes beautifully modifies all the poems with which it is connected running backwards and forwards through time across the great web of Poetry itself.

4) Ambiguity and Ambivalence:

We must be open to, and delighted with, ambiguity. Unlike those original Fellows of the Royal Society 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 our Lord'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* 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 vision 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 and beautiful 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 represents, not a slogan about love but 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.

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

5) 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*, 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 Heaney's great poem, just as we are the scientific observer looking at the pipe from outside and noting its features, suddenly we are what we observe:

"You stand there like a pipe being played by water"

In many ways this line of Heaney's sums up all I am trying to say about the fully engaged way of coming to a text that great poetry demands of us. 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 some sudden heartbreaking song 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

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.

In *The Redress of Poetry* : Oxford Lectures Faber 1995 p.xv

A History of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge first edition 1667, taken from the facsimile edited by Cope and Jones. this and subsequent extracts from Sprat's influential work can be found on <http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/Ëjlynch/Texts/sprat.html> and on <http://www.towson.edu/Ë|tinkler/prose/sprat.html>

As You Like It Act III scene 3 line 20

ibid see above note i

Descriptive Catalogue, 1810, *The Vision of Judgement*

Hamlet Act III scene II line 24

The Elixir in *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse* ed. RS Thomas Faber 1967 p. 88

In *The Spirit Level*, Faber 1996 p.1

In *The Redress of Poetry* : Oxford Lectures Faber 1995 p.xv

Prayer in *A Choice of George Herbert's Verse* ed. RS Thomas Faber 1967 p27

Artillery lines 25-28 in *The Works of Geroge Herbert*, Bickers, 1873 vol. II 257

For example Ephesians 6:13 forward

In *The Sermons of John Donne* ed. Potter and Simpson, Los Angeles, 1953-1962 vol. V p.364

ibid vol. II pp.235-249

Auguries of Innocence lines 1-4 In *The Poetical Works of William Blake* edited by John Sampson, OUP 1952 p171

See above note ii

Ode to a Nightingale line 6-10 in *The Poetical works of John Keats* ed. HW Garrod Oxford 1939 p.257

The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, SPCK 1978 p.90

The Book of Common Prayer Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent

In *The Poetical Works of William Blake* edited by John Sampson, OUP 1952 p85

In T.S.Eliot *Selected Prose* edited by Frank Kermode Faber 1975 P.38

ibid p.44

The Wasteland lines 62-3 in T.S.Eliot Collected Poems 1909-1962 Faber 1974 p.65

The Vision of Dante translated by H.F. Carey OUP 1923 Canto III lines 53-4, p.9

In Phillip Larkin Collected Poems edited with an Introduction by Anthony Thwaite, *Faber* 1988 pp110-111

John 15:16

In *The Spirit Level*, *Faber* 1996 p.1

Ode on a Grecian Urn lines10-14 in *The Poetical works of John Keats* ed. HW Garrod Oxford 1939 p.261

In *The Spirit Level*, *Faber* 1996 p.1