18 "THE FOG IS RISING" - LAST POSTS… (December 2019)

"I must go in; the fog is rising"

(Emily Dickinson's last words)

I don't wish this December's offering to be thought of as unduly morbid (amidst the unremitting November rains in North Wales and elsewhere…), but I thought it might be interesting to look at poems written by poets reaching the ends of their lives (rather than just the end of the year). They would be selecting, if they were able in time, what they particularly wished to leave to the world of themselves, their responses and their ideas.

There are at least two ways of looking at this. Here, you might think, is a professional poet, a thinker, possibly a genius – at least a *wordsmith* who has reflected long and hard about the human condition. What treasures will be revealed in these final poetic craftings? Or, might it be that the poet has entered old age and succumbed to what the years so often bring: denials, recantations, re-shapings of old poems? This may be a poetic voice losing its razor edge, making peace with Religion before it is too late, becoming hard-line conservative where once the voice had seemed radical: in short, a poetry that may have lost it?

Well, let's take a look. This is a rather haphazard selection, guided purely by my own whimsical curiosity, so feel free to search in other directions afterwards. I love Emily Dickinson's reported last words (above), so full of mystery and ambiguity right to the end. Go in… *where*? Is the fog *outside* her mind… or inside? Is the fog clearing, and if so, *what* can now be seen…? Would you not rather stay *outside* to see it…?

Let's then begin with Emily Dickinson's own very last poem. According to Spark Notes the poem is No. 1632, which she apparently wrote in the winter of 1885 after she had refused further medical aid for nephritis, or renal failure.

SO GIVE ME BACK TO DEATH—

So give me back to Death—
The Death I never feared
Except that it deprived of thee—
And now, by Life deprived,
In my own Grave I breathe
And estimate its size—
Its size is all that Hell can guess—
And all that Heaven was—

This scores highly for me. I love the trade-mark hyphens, those hesitations, particularly at the end — For a start, it's not too long or verbose and it picks up many ideas from past poems, where she pictured her death and imagined what it might feel like, lying in her tomb or in her coffin as it was lowered into the ground. Eg:

"And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here –"

(the ending of "I Felt a Funeral in my Brain" – 340 – note the final dash -)

In this, her last poem, she calmly faces her separation from someone she loved (though we are still, I think, not sure who that someone was) through that 'Death' she has imagined for so long,. As paradoxical as ever, Dickinson can "breathe" in

her “own Grave”, even though “deprived” by… not Death but (and here’s the surprise) … “Life”! The last two lines seem opposed – her “Grave” is a place of “Hell”, in other words, torment: the final separation from “thee”, surely? But then, does the last line imply that there WAS a Heaven that she experienced once…? Is there a thought missing here? As always, Emily Dickinson teases and challenges us to make sense of her hints and suggestions — what the French might call the “non-dit”, or what lies beneath the surface. There is little outright resolution here, but why should there be? Death is, after all, the “undiscovered country…”

(PS I note there may be some controversy here because in the Collected Poems edited by Dr Ralph W. Franklin in 1999, he listed No. 1789 “The saddest noise, the sweetest noise” as the last. I prefer to go with “So give me back to Death-”)

Sticking with female poets for the moment (and we have already pondered about Sylvia Plath’s final poem), here is Elizabeth Bishop’s last poem, published posthumously in The New Yorker October 28th 1979.

Sonnet

Caught — the bubble
in the spirit level,
a creature divided;
and the compass needle
wobbling and wavering,
undecided.
Freed — the broken
thermometer’s mercury
running away;
and the rainbow-bird
from the narrow bevel
of the empty mirror,
flying wherever
feels like, gay!

Another consummate poem, surely? As a sonnet, it's a surprise, for it's hardly formal. What looks like the sestet comes *first*, mentioning entrapment and losing one's way — illness too, with the image of the thermometer. I love the images of

the bubble in the spirit level, and the compass needle wobbling. But the succeeding octet is the heavier and more decisive of the two parts. Freedom: that cutting loose of moorings, and the flight of the "rainbow bird", like one of Braque's beautiful bird

prints, suggests that death is not to be feared - that Bishop, after years of illnesses and indecisive-ness, living in Brazil with her lesbian lover, was finally able to realise an imaginative freedom. There is just that slightly dark note of the "empty mirror" with its "narrow bevel" suggesting

possibly a last and personal fear that she might wish to fly from – a mirror that refuses to show her reflection. There are rhymes, but they are not apparent and the discipline they represent seems, magically, to be dissolving: the flight of the soul in a state of happiness.

There is another poem written four years earlier that I didn't know. It also speaks of death and is more fearful of the separation that her death will entail. The ending is resigned, but also movingly happy in spite of her approaching death. It's full of warmth and of vital details about their love: "coffee-flavored mouth" and "instant blue eyes".

BREAKFAST SONG

My love, my saving grace,
your eyes are awfully blue.
I kiss your funny face,
your coffee-flavored mouth.
Last night I slept with you.
Today I love you so

how can I bear to go
(as soon I must, I know)
to bed with ugly death
in that cold, filthy place,
to sleep there without you,
without the easy breath
and nightlong, limblong warmth
I've grown accustomed to?
—Nobody wants to die;
tell me it is a lie!
But no, I know it's true.
It's just the common case;
there's nothing one can do.
My love, my saving grace,
your eyes are awfully blue
early and instant blue.

Turning to male poets, it's tempting to include "Bright Star" by Keats and "January 22nd, Missolonghi" by Lord Byron, but these are both very well-known and are also rather far back in time. Instead, let's look at the last poem in the Collected Poems of WB Yeats. He died on 28th January 1939, so war had already been declared across Europe.

Politics

'In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms.' *(Thomas Mann)*

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics,
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has both read and thought,

And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms.

Well, you might say, the old boy's hormones were certainly working, at least! This is a teasingly 'throwaway' poem. We shouldn't forget that he was a senator, a senior politician in Ireland. Is he really dumping all thought of "war and war's alarms" for the chance to hold a "girl" once more in his arms? And this from the poet who warned in "The Second Coming" that "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (with, I think, the Elizabethan force of "mere" meaning "total"):

"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

Has our poet lost the plot here, or else, is the poem more about how the public, the great movement of social and political forces, should always be balanced against the utterly personal, the imaginative, the intensely human – a little like the "Breakfast Song" above? I tend instinctively towards the latter, although here, I'm aware I'm standing on slightly thin ice.

At all events, WB Yeats' last poems, taken as a whole, are for me supreme works of poetic genius. Here, for example, is one of my out-and-out favourites with an essay I wrote for my pupils. Skip that, if you don't want to be *essayed*.

Long-Legged Fly

That civilization may not sink
Its great battle lost,
Quiet the dog, tether the pony
To a distant post.
Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread,
His eyes fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

That the topless towers be burnt
And men recall that face,
Move most gently if move you must
In this lonely place.
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,
That nobody looks; her feet
Practise a tinker shuffle
Picked up on the street.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
Her mind moves upon silence.

That girls at puberty may find
The first Adam in their thought,
Shut the door of the Pope's Chapel,
Keep those children out.
There on that scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.
With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

This poem starts with an immediate problem or tension. What can possibly be the link between Julius Caesar or Michelangelo and a "long-legged fly"? The comparison at first glance seems absurd. The poem appears to take three moments, when three important people, Julius Caesar, Helen of Troy and Michelangelo need silence and stillness to achieve whatever momentous things they have to achieve. We, the readers, are directly addressed and told to be quiet so that these famous people (though Helen of Troy is fictitious) can do what they have to do. And their minds, we are told, need to "move... upon silence", in the same way as a long-legged fly does on a river. At first glance, this seems like a startling connection.

This is, however, a poem of great quiet and simplicity. It opens with simple commands ("Quiet the dog, tether the pony") but we notice immediately that there is an inversion in the syntax, which reflects and emphasises each time the importance of the command: "That civilisation may not sink..". These are big stakes – if we do not obey the order, there is a danger that the civilised world will fall. Caesar, the great military leader, is in his tent, planning the invasion of Gaul or Britain, in order to further the aims of "civilisation". The tension, and, indeed, the paradox here is that he is planning war, but needs peace and quiet in which to do it.

In the second stanza, Helen is described as "three parts a child" and is practising a "tinker's shuffle". The paradox, here, is that she is supposed to be the most beautiful, irresistible woman in the whole world, and yet she is childish and her little dance, the "tinker 'shuffle" is downmarket, to say the least. And yet, that childishness and that earthy lowness may be what makes her so attractive, ultimately. There is another paradox in this stanza. Do we want the towers of Troy to be burnt and all that desperate bloodshed? Apparently, yes. Helen is destined to create the conditions which make the fall of Troy inevitable and thus give us The Iliad, one of the world's great literary works (one might go further and say one of the cornerstones of western civilisation).

Lastly, we are told to be quiet, so that "girls at puberty may Find the first Adam in their thought". Michelangelo is here painting the Sistine Chapel with one of the greatest paintings the world has produced. The paradox, however, is that it is supposed to be a great religious painting, but in fact what it reminds girls of is their sexuality. If Eve had not tempted Adam, then civilisation really would not have got started. So, here, the importance of art in stirring feelings (and sexuality is at the heart of it as it was in stanza 2) is again being underlined. We started with power politics, then literature, then art. All are linked to the survival of western civilisation and all, the poem seems to suggest, need a certain meditative silence.

Each of the stanzas ends with the two-line refrain comparing each of these characters' minds to a long-legged fly, which is an extraordinary image. And yet the fly summons up an idea of a hot summer's day and the quiet of a river. The fly moves silently and naturally, though it also has the paradoxical quality of doing the impossible – walking on the water. It is gentle, too, and we are asked to move "gently" in the second stanza. We are asked to contribute our part to these great moments, to participate actively. We, as readers must attempt to share this mystical, creative silence, which nature seems to have and which human civilisation, even at its most destructive, must try to share and cultivate.

The poem is as simple as the movement of this fly. There are some rhymes (in lines 2&4 and 6&8), which make for a fluid, yet also jagged structure, and there is a rhythm, which is perhaps not so much metrical as created by the repetition of the simple commands and the two-line refrain. Each stanza begins with the inversion "That...", emphasising thus the importance not only of the need for silence, but of the participation of the reader or onlooker. We, the audience, have our part to play.

Great art, the poem seems to be saying, can be profoundly destructive (and necessary); it may also be sexual, with all the problems that sexuality can bring; but this art is necessary for "civilisation" to continue. And linked to this "great art" (which includes the art of war), there is a need for stillness and silence, rooted in nature, in order to create it. To compare Caesar to a fly might seem at first to be an outrageous assertion and an utterly paradoxical comparison, and yet, the poem seems to be claiming that civilisation and humans are, indeed, paradoxical. And the poem seems to be claiming also that, no matter how complex civilisation and art may be, they must also be linked to the workings of nature, even at its most apparently insignificant level.

What then of Auden? I remember seeing WH Auden in Cambridge some time around 1972/3, just before he died in September 1973. He was giving a lecture on "Poetry, Prayer and…*what*? Penance? Penitence? Prudence? Prurience? I've forgotten — because the lecture (which filled to bursting the lecture hall where we waited breathlessly for the 'High Priest' of radical poetry in the Thirties and Forties) was so deadly dull. There was the face, lined like the map of Eastern Europe after the Versailles Treaty had completed its job, but Auden himself, wearing slippers as he shuffled on to the stage, was, I'm afraid, a big yawn. Here, with a few apologies, is the last poem of his last *Collected Poems*.

Archaeology - W. H. Auden

The archaeologist's spade
delves into dwellings
vacancied long ago,

unearthing evidence
of life-ways no one
would dream of leading now,

concerning which he has not much
to say that he can prove:
the lucky man!

Knowledge may have its purposes,
but guessing is always
more fun than knowing.

We do know that Man,
from fear or affection,
has always graved His dead.

What disastered a city,
volcanic effusion,
fluvial outrage,

or a human horde,
agog for slaves and glory,
is visually patent,

and we're pretty sure that,
as soon as places were built,
their rulers,

though gluttoned on sex
and blanded by flattery,
must often have yawned.

But do grain-pits signify
a year of famine?
Where a coin-series

peters out, should we infer
some major catastrophe?
Maybe. Maybe.

From murals and statues
we get a glimpse of what
the Old Ones bowed down to,

but cannot conceit
in what situations they blushed
or shrugged their shoulders.

Poets have learned us their myths,
but just how did They take them?
That's a stumper.

When Norsemen heard thunder,
did they seriously believe
Thor was hammering?

No, I'd say: I'd swear
that men have always lounged in myths
as Tall Stories,

that their real earnest
has been to grant excuses
for ritual actions.

Only in rites
can we renounce our oddities
and be truly entired.

Not that all rites
should be equally fonded:
some are abominable.

There's nothing the Crucified
would like less
than butchery to appease Him.

CODA

From Archaeology
one moral, at least, may be drawn,
to wit, that all

our school text-books lie.
What they call History
is nothing to vaunt of,

being made, as it is,
by the criminal in us:
goodness is timeless.

Perhaps you like this…? But “vacancied”? graved”? “disastered”? “entired”? “fonded”? Is this all a bit ‘sloppied’? Perhaps, the Coda is the best bit. At least it is briefer than this meandering meditation. Yes, there are remnants of the great poet (“men have always lounged in myth”). There’s a sureness in the style, but I find it preachy and it goes nowhere very interesting. True, “goodness is timeless” but do we really need Auden to hit us over the head like this? There’s a germ of an idea somewhere, but I would say that Heaney’s ‘unearthing’ poems on Tollund Man, and all the marvellous bog poems, eg “Punishment”, do the job better.

Sorry, Wystan! Not this time, for me at least, though I remain a great admirer of your poetry at its best, including the beautiful memorial that you wrote for Yeats’s death, “In Memory of WB Yeats”. But in old age you became too *pedantic* and mannered.

I have written elsewhere of my fascination for Wallace Stevens. Like WB Yeats, he suddenly found his form again in the last poems. One of his finest, I think is “To An Old Philosopher in Rome”, ostensibly about the death of George Santayana (but premonitory about his own approaching departure). It is quite long, so I’ll append it later on.

I want instead to look at the very last poem in the *Collected Poems* published in 1954, and then consider a later poem that is not included in the collection. Here, first of all, is the last of his final assemblage of poems, “The Rock”, that were added to the *Collected Works*.

Not Ideas About The Thing But The Thing Itself

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.

You could say that I just love his language, the words. True, but in my puzzlement, I search hard for sense and meanings; often Wallace Stevens' poetry is notoriously "difficult", though that should not put us off, because the language and rhythms are often gorgeous and strange phrases sweep over us.

Luckily, there is plenty of good sense apart from that which works on our senses. From the word go, Stevens was compulsively obsessed by the extent to which our minds, our imaginations, are shaped by the world – call it “reality”, what is outside our immediate senses and exterior to our thought. But our minds, our sensory perceptions, also *shape* the world. Our world is, in many ways, that which we *perceive* it to be – and we are all similar in some respects but very different in others. Trying to resolve this philosophical conundrum, Stevens uses symbols, images, colours, painterly perspectives, musical resonances – to test how far ‘reality’ is *imagined* and how far ‘reality’ itself (whatever that is when it is set out in print) impinges ON the imagination. As an artist (using words in the same way that a painter might use paint) the poet re-creates a world that must stand in some relation to the physical, exterior world…. Unless that physical world is non-existent and the world we experience is simply *our* experience of some private reality: though one which, however, an artist *may* be able to mediate for us and thereby make us more aware of other, multifarious realities. *(I hope that makes some sense…?)*

The title is interesting. It directly addresses the problem that has haunted his poetic imagination all his life. By ‘day’, Stevens was (eventually) an insurance executive dealing with extremely hard-headed ‘reality’, but by ‘night’, in his imaginative life, he was a poet, a philosopher, a fantasist.

Here is my reading. The bird, symbolising a song-maker, a ‘poet’, is here in a state of vulnerability. “Panache” refers both to a flamboyance of style, but also to a tuft or plume of feathers, like a cock’s tail or a plumed helmet. Stevens likes to play on the indeterminacy of words. Dreams and the fantasies of our minds seem to be rejected at this point:

> “It was not from the vast ventriloquism
> Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .”

If the “sun” here represents or symbolises some exterior ‘reality’, then the poem appears to be suggesting that the bird’s “scrawny cry” (poetry’s rather enfeebled utterance) is, for all its imperfections part and parcel of the ‘world’. There is something triumphant about this discovery, as if the bird or the poet, or both, had been divorced from the world, shut away in their private imaginings. There is music (which is another form of art) and rejoicing that there IS after all a

correspondence between the imagined world (of art, music, ideas) and the "colossal sun" of the-world-as-it-confronts-us-daily.

The image of the bird reprises an earlier poem, one of his first, from "Harmonium", Wallace Stevens' quite astonishing first collection that burst upon an amazed (literary) world in 1922.

The Bird With The Coppery, Keen Claws

Above the forest of the parakeets,
A parakeet of parakeets prevails,
A pip of life amid a mort of tails. (mort – note on hunting horn signifying the death of the hunted deer)

(The rudiments of tropics are around,
Aloe of ivory, pear of rusty rind.)
His lids are white because his eyes are blind.

He is not paradise of parakeets,
Of his gold ether, golden alguazil, (Spanish law officer)
Except because he broods there and is still.

Panache upon panache, his tails deploy
Upward and outward, in green-vented forms,
His tip a drop of water full of storms.

But though the turbulent tinges undulate
As his pure intellect applies its laws,
He moves not on his coppery, keen claws.

He munches a dry shell while he exerts
His will, yet never ceases, perfect cock,
To flare, in the sun-pallor of his rock.

If the bird represents the poet, there is something more ominous going on in the poem ("he broods there and is still"). There may be tropical splendour with

exotic landscapes but there seems to be no paradise - “of parakeets”. Ambiguities abound – he may be exerting his will but he “munches on a dry shell” which seems negative. Is the bird “real” or a poetic figment of the imagination? There is something uncertain, too, about “the sun-pallor of his rock”. The bird somehow reminds me of “Byzantium” by WB Yeats, and another bird/poetry/artefact:

“Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the starlit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood. “

Nevertheless, there is something gorgeous and glorious about Stevens’ bird “perfect cock” “never ceasing… to flare”.

But then, just as we are scratching our heads and poring over “The Thing Itself”, here comes an even later poem of Stevens, almost certainly his very last, though not appearing in the *Collected Poems*. This is the unamended version; Holly Stevens, his daughter, took it upon herself to change “décor” to “distance”, which seems quite wrong to me. “Décor” has an arty staginess to it. Décors are imagined. “Distance” is altogether too flat and un-Stevensy.

Of Mere Being

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze décor.

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

Yet another bird! It all takes place "at the end of the mind, Beyond the last thought". Paradoxical? An exotic landscape (of the mind) again. An "arty" bird, this time gold-feathered, singing "a foreign song". It sings "without human meaning, without human feeling", but then, why should it? It is a bird, in a palm.

Is rationality being ditched, perhaps, with:

"You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy." ?

The pathetic fallacy seems to be rejected, anyway. Nature is exterior to humans. Quite simply, "The bird sings". There is a lot of ambiguity, particularly in the last tercet. The palm stands on the *edge* of space, precariously, near the edge of…*space*? What space, inner, outer? The wind moves slowly (unthreateningly?) "in the branches". And then, that glorious line (just try saying the words to yourself):

"The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down."

"Down" is negative (?) – or a sign of humility, defeat? Surely not. This is supremely "artistic", and, dare one say, triumphant? Provocative? Is this the triumph of the imagination OVER "mere" reality? And the title! "Mere", in the Elizabethan sense of "total"? Or "Mere" in the modern, dismissive sense? Or both? What else is there *apart* from "being"?

I think this is an extraordinary poem, which one can read over and over again and still feel unsettled by. It's a fitting end to an output devoted to exploring the fine interplay of the imagination ON the world, and the imagination acted upon BY the world. I don't think the poet ever wanted us to come away with total solutions from any of his poems. They were evasive games, hazardings, visions

designed to unsteady us, make us giddy and cause us to reflect dizzily on the extraordinary puzzle of our human consciousness and our own imagination. Our minds conceive of and interpret the world about us (and poems!). No other animal does this. Why? *How*? We are no closer really to answering all of this. Art, however, can push us into reflection and can "tease us *out of thought*", as John Keats has it in "Ode On a Grecian Urn", a somewhat similar meditation on art and art's exploration of the relationship between the imagination and the world it engages with.

I would have considered Philip Larkin's last poems here, but I've looked elsewhere this year at his final collection, *High Windows*. Larkin feared death (his last words were "I am going to the inevitable…"). Hee foresaw his own terrified ending from cancer and in a hospital (of all places the one he dreaded most), with his poem, "The Building". I've also considered elsewhere the last poem of that collection: "The Explosion". His final, sombrely ironic poem, however, directly confronting what he calls "extinction's alp" in "The Old Fools", was "Aubade", which I looked at in No.9 (March 2019) and is amongst his best verse.

Let's end, then, with two poets who are more fully resigned to their departures.

The following, well-known poem by Emily Brontë, "No Coward Soul Is Mine", was the last thing she ever wrote, according to, I think, her sister Charlotte. At any rate, it is the poem Emily chose to have read at her funeral. She died at 30, having lived a difficult life, losing her mother early, and also two sisters. What comes through in this poem, however, is her resolute faith in the power of "God" – an 'artistic deity who 'creates' and 'animates'. Inversions of syntax and powerful enjambements build up an affirmation of "Existence", even in the face of Death's power to destroy "suns and universes".

Universes!

This "God" seems both paternal *and* maternal, providing Emily with absolute reassurance that she will not be lost, since she is associated with God's "wide-embracing love". By addressing "God" directly, Emily neatly avoids having to apply a gender to this "Almighty…Deity". Although I do not share her confidence in such a "Deity", in poetic terms the poem is fiercely and courageously emphatic.

No Coward Soul Is Mine

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere
I see Heaven's glories shine
And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear

O God within my breast
Almighty ever-present Deity
Life, that in me hast rest,
As I Undying Life, have power in Thee

Vain are the thousand creeds
That move men's hearts, unutterably vain,
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thy infinity,
So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of Immortality.

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years
Pervades and broods above,
Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears

Though earth and moon were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And Thou wert left alone
Every Existence would exist in thee

There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Since thou art Being and Breath
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

Where is "Mere Being" here? you might ask. I think this is a wonderfully 'vital' poem. It *enacts* 'life' with its vigour, and it celebrates, ultimately, *human* will and *human* imagination. I think Emily Brontë might well have appreciated the "gold-feathered bird" singing in the "palm" standing "on the edge of space".

Lastly, we come to Seamus Heaney, whom I went to hear in Paris not many years before his death. We took some of our pupils from Sèvres, and, unlike the visit to hear Ted Hughes (see a previous posting this year on "Ted and Sylvia"), or listening to Auden droning on, this was a warm, generous-hearted sharing of himself and his gifts. There was plenty of laughter, thoughtfulness and sociability at this event.

Heaney's last published poem was written in 2013, just months before his death. He had been invited by Carol Anne Duffy to contribute a poem to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. He chose the following beautiful and heart-breakingly prescient poem of Edward Thomas as his starting point. Thomas joined up because he felt he had to. He was not a young hot-head, keen for glory and action. On the contrary, he was aged 27, married with three children and he could have avoided active service. He was very undecided about going abroad to fight, and it was quite probably Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken" (written almost certainly with Thomas in mind – they were friends and Frost had been visiting) that may have tipped the balance and caused Edward Thomas finally to decide in favour of enlisting.

He was killed shortly after being posted to France in 1917, at the Battle of Arras.

(NB "The team's head-brass" refers to the brasses on the harnessing of the team of horses used for ploughing. The glinting would have caught the sun…)

As the Team's Head-Brass **by Edward Thomas**

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
The lovers disappeared into the wood.
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
That strewed an angle of the fallow, and
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
Of charlock. Every time the horses turned
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
About the weather, next about the war.
Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed
Once more.
The blizzard felled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away?'
'When the war's over.' So the talk began –
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.
'Have you been out?' 'No.' 'And don't want to, perhaps?'
'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more. . . . Have many gone
From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes: a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
'And I should not have sat here. Everything

Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good.' Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time
I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

We can see, in the conversation with the ploughman that seems so naturally reported, how gloomy the poet feels about being sent to France. There are little details everywhere, as if this event is being specially recalled for the last time. It all feels very poignant and charged with significance.

Although the conversation seems spontaneously reported in a very lifelike way, actually the poem is quite strictly controlled and based on blank verse of ten syllables. This is stamped in the Wordsworthian tradition of nature poetry: autobiographical (as in *The Prelude*) and conversational – in the colloquial language of common people. The ordinariness of the occasion is quietly emphasised. War is the great disrupter. " 'Everything Would have been different. For it would have been Another world.'"

The detail of the lovers disappearing into the wood (to make love?) reminds me always of Thomas Hardy's slightly similar poem, "In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'", which also features ploughing (well, harrowing, actually…), that all-defining and immutably human activity.

I

Only a man harrowing clods
 In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
 Half asleep as they stalk.

II

Only thin smoke without flame

From the heaps of couch-grass;

Yet this will go onward the same

Though Dynasties pass.

III

Yonder a maid and her wight

Come whispering by:

War's annals will cloud into night

Ere their story die.

There is a terrible wistfulness in both poems and a feeling that outside events, far off, can have terrible repercussions nearer home. Both poems suggest that love and lovers will not be swept away, but Thomas's poem is obviously more directly observed and far less confident about the impact war will have.

Here is Heaney's response to Edward Thomas's poem, in many ways reminiscent of an early poem of his, "The Follower", about his farming father (attached at the end). Heaney enjoys knowing the technicalities of ploughing. Here, though, unlike "The Follower" or "As the Team's Head-Brass", the plough is drawn by a tractor, not horses. There is a sense of the mundane routine, the daily task of ploughing. It is unremarkable, but also it is *'remarkable'* as well.

In a Field

And there I was in the middle of a field,

The furrows once called "scores' still with their gloss,

The tractor with its hoisted plough just gone

Snarling at an unexpected speed

Out on the road. Last of the jobs,

The windings had been ploughed, furrows turned

Three ply or four round each of the four sides
Of the breathing land, to mark it off
And out. Within that boundary now
Step the fleshy earth and follow
The long-healed footprints of one who arrived
From nowhere, unfamiliar and de-mobbed,
In buttoned khaki and buffed army boots,
Bruising the turned-up acres of our back field
To stumble from the windings' magic ring
And take me by a hand to lead me back
Through the same old gate into the yard
Where everyone has suddenly appeared,
All standing waiting.

We are not certain, but it seems to be Edward Thomas's spirit, who returns to lead the persona "by a hand", back to the land of his early memory. The poem is in similarly controlled blank verse, responding to the same poetic impulses as Thomas's poem. The ending imagines reunifications, finding loved ones "waiting" patiently.

But this wasn't Heaney's last word.

He finished his very last poem just ten days before he died on 30th August 2013. It is inspired by a painting by Gustave Caillebotte, painted c. 1872, before he "went public" as an impressionist painter. Part of the charm of this painting for me, apart from its vivid colouring, is its very banality. Nothing is 'happening' here. Yet a canal, though winding through pastoral scenes, is also linked to human activity, and in the far distance we can see reminders of such a world towards which the canal is leading us: a world of work and human productivity. The canal links different environments, different worlds through its "sleeping stream". There is a magic about this.

The poem has an unhurried pace and a wittiness (the concrete blocks, the "sullen shine"). Using near-rhymes, it is a perfectly classical sonnet – the view first and then in the sestet the reflection. There is calm control everywhere. I'm not sure about "coolth" (!) but I'm quite happy to let him have it (perhaps it's a good Irish word…?). The poem is also about art, which can draw the "soul" on to "mind itself or stray beyond". "Stray" is perfect. To stray is to wander off so that you become lost:

there's an element of risk or danger, also wilfulness. Usually, if you stray you know that you shouldn't be leaving the path. But there is also a vulnerability about "stray": stray animals need a home. The poem rejects extremes ("not truly bright or overcast". It ends in dirt, "clay" out of which man is made: I love the "zest of verges", as if they were the lemon slices on a cocktail, "zest" is fresh and vigorous, nice tasting, optimistic, where dirt might have felt 'soiled'. Heaney is, to the last, alive to nuances, balanced tensions and playful ambiguities. The poem ends with "beyond".

"Beyond the last thought…"?

How lovely to leave with such an essentially sunny (the concrete blocks *do* have sharp shadows) picture of life, not showy or glamorous - rather rooted in stillness and the mundane.

This *is* Life - and the poem looks to Life rather than to extinction.

Bord d'un canal près de Naples (Gustave Caillebotte c. 1872)

Banks of a Canal by Seamus Heaney

Say ‘canal’ and there’s that final vowel
Towing silence with it, slowing time
To a walking pace, a path, a whitewashed gleam
Of dwellings at the skyline. World stands still.
The stunted concrete mocks the classical.
Water says, ‘My place here is in dream,
In quiet good standing. Like a sleeping stream,
Come rain or sullen shine I’m peaceable.’
Stretched to the horizon, placid ploughland,
The sky not truly bright or overcast:
I know that clay, the damp and dirt of it,
The coolth along the bank, the grassy zest
Of verges, the path not narrow but still straight
Where soul could mind itself or stray beyond.

Finis

Here are the poems mentioned earlier:

Follower Seamus Heaney

My father worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.
The horses strained at his clicking tongue.

An expert. He would set the wing
And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.
The sod rolled over without breaking.
At the headrig, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round
And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,
Mapping the furrow exactly.

I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod.

I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away

To an Old Philosopher in Rome

Wallace Stevens

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end –

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

How easily the blown banners change to wings…
Things dark on the horizons of perception
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
Of the unknown. The newsboys' muttering
Becomes another murmuring; the smell
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled…

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle as it evades the sight, these are
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome,
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
And these beneath the shadow of a shape

In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that of which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.
Speak to your pillow as if it was yourself.
Be orator but with an accurate tongue
And without eloquence, O, half-asleep,
Of the pity that is the memorial of this room,

So that we feel, in this illumined large,
The veritable small, so that each of us
Beholds himself in you, and hears his voice
In yours, master and commiserable man,
Intent on your particles of nether-do,

Your dozing in the depths of wakefulness,
In the warmth of your bed, at the edge of your chair, alive
Yet living in two worlds, impenitent
As to one, and, as to one, most penitent,
Impatient for the grandeur that you need

In so much misery; and yet finding it
Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead,
As in the last drop of the deepest blood,
it from the heart and lies there to be seen,

Even as the blood of an empire, it might be,
For a citizen of heaven though still of Rome.
It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most.
It is older than the oldest speech of Rome.
This is the tragic accent of the scene.

And you – it is you that speak it, without speech,
The loftiest syllable among loftiest things,
The one invulnerable man among
Crude captains, the naked majesty, if you like,
Of bird-nest arches and of rain-stained-vaults.

The sounds drift in. The buildings are remembered.
The life of the city never lets go, nor do you
Ever want it to. It is part of the life in your room.
Its domes are the architecture of your bed.
The bells keep on repeating solemn names

In choruses and choirs of choruses,
Unwilling that mercy should be a mystery
Of silence, that any solitude of sense
Should give you more than their peculiar chords
And reverberations clinging to whisper still.

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensest theatre, and pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

George Santayana is quoted as saying on his death bed:

"What comes before or after does not matter, and this is especially so when one is dying. It is so easy for one now to see things under the form of eternity – and in particular that little fragment called my life."

It's useful to know that Wallace Stevens was at Harvard with George Santayana, an American philosopher, poet, essayist who died in Rome in 1952, having lived most of his life in Europe.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." is one of his better- known aphorisms. He was an atheist, but his background was Spanish and at a cultural level he valued Catholic traditions, which is clearly one of the tensions running through this poem that imagines the occasion of his death. At Harvard, Santayana studied philosophy under William James and he later returned to teach philosophy there, influencing T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost and Gertrude Stein, besides Stevens who became a friend.

Wallace Stevens himself was strongly agnostic and saw religion, as Santayana did, as an achievement of the human imagination. Santayana was also a poet and novelist and the poem is keen to show how this "philosopher" shaped his life, almost in an artistic way, rather than having had his life shaped randomly by events.

Rome is a meeting of different worlds, historic, religious, political and the poem tries to respond imaginatively to this life, of thought and art, which now stands at the "threshold" of another state. There is a present here, poised between a past, which is done with now, and a future of blank uncertainty: death. It's a difficult poem in many ways, as Stevens works allusively, elliptically, tentatively, hinting here, qualifying there, always hard to pin down.

This is a poem about different ways of perceiving. The poem, and the "philosopher's" thinking which inspired it, does not see the world as predetermined, rather, the world is made up of contingencies, which humans can shape (into art) and control to some extent, through the use of their imaginations. I've never read any of Santayana's philosophy (Memo to self: *must* do so), but I get the sense in the poem, of Stevens wishing to honour the philosopher's ideas through the artistry of a poem that mirrors to some extent the way Santayana lived and thought. Does a realm of the 'spirit' exist, or is it more a realm of the imagination? Or both…?

For me, it's a very rich poem that needs to be read and reread for some of the meanings to unfold and reveal themselves. Each time I read it, I see new things emerging from the dense interplay of words and sounds.