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In the Shadow of the Ineffable: Imagery in John Burnside's 'Annunciations'

At the beginning of his 'Annunciations,' the writer John Burnside focuses on the angel rather than the Virgin, indirectly emphasizing what is seldom openly realized in most portrayals of the Annunciation: that the moment is an encounter, rather than a Christian metonym for humanity's alliance with its god in the struggle between good and evil.

One could argue that, in this encounter, the angel is simply a factotum; and, for centuries, the pictorial renderings of this encounter have reinforced that idea through their portrayal of the event as a physical happening within the mundane world: the angel and the Virgin substantial in their thick robes as they face each other, unsmiling, reverential, a thin lily in a pot, the garden behind them lush or architectural. The source for these portraits of angel and Virgin has always been the artist's sense of human beauty moderated by his or her cultural milieu. Burnside's sources are multiple and less time bound, but primarily they come from Renaissance paintings:

I spent a few weeks in Italy, studying Annunciation paintings. Simone Martini and Botticelli, as mentioned above; also a gorgeous Baldovinetti Annunciation mural in a chapel on a hill outside Florence [...] Many of the paintings I looked at were in Florence, a city that seems to love this subject matter. (Personal email, March 2, 2011)

Into this contemplation of Renaissance iconography Burnside weaves classical mythology and European folktales, all of which are then refracted through his personal mythology, which in turn is a transformation of his own troubled history refracted through his profound sense of the infinite.

To examine this further, let's walk through the opening prose poem of the series.

At first, the angel is almost invisible. He has been a mental phenomenon, an idea; now, gradually, his physical presence can be discerned. (*Common Knowledge*, p. 17)

At the poem's opening, the angel inhabits an area between the visible and the invisible. The angel comes out of nowhere; or, rather, he appears to be simply

a matter of perception. These first two sentences bring up several questions that are intrinsic to the poem's emotional impact on the reader. First, if the angel is a mental phenomenon, in whose mind does Burnside place him – whose idea is he? And second, why, given his purpose on earth, is materiality a necessity?

The description continues:

He has just completed a movement of some kind; his muscular wings are still flexed. There is no question of his sharing the Virgin's indecision or reluctance: his energy is new and pure; he participates in the grace he carries. (p. 17)

The angel has gone through his own form of birth, metaphysically downsizing from 'a mental phenomenon' into a physical manifestation, which aligns with the Virgin's humanness. The angel's wings, however, which logically separate him from the Virgin's humanness, make him more animal: they are 'muscular' and 'flexed.' And the quality of his appearance, or birth, aligns him with the Virgin's insemination, which is also both physical and numinous.

The Virgin in her first appearance in the poem has no real physical presence but rather is reduced to 'indecision or reluctance' – she becomes a metonym for emotions in flux. Even given the angel's materiality – his alignment with the human and the animal – his purpose in the world is divine: 'he participates in the grace he carries,' and his physicality is, at this point in the poem, a matter of energy. Nonetheless, 'As it materializes his body feels strong and light; he tastes a cool, almost liquid air, sweet and thick as seed.' The angel is capable of feeling sensation and savoring sensuality, which is encompassing and fecund. It is as if sex, 'thick as seed,' is a kind of medium that the angel now inhabits: 'Though there is a danger that this strength will wither, or become too swollen to contain, he is, for this moment, possessed of an absolute beauty.'

This liminality, which presages a coming-into-being of an idea that has momentous impact, occurs over and over in Burnside's writing. In the poems, it is almost always connected with the narrator's, the *I*'s, understanding of what is essential and crucial to his life or to life in its greater sense.

The characters in Burnside's novels are also charged with potential realization, and his novels could more accurately be called philosophical meditations on the impulse toward revelation; they lie closer to the realm of poetry than that of prose. The lines between characters' identities are characteristically blurred by the fact that they share the same impulses and metaphysical leanings. Burnside identifies a need to perceive the fleeting as a feature of his poetic narrator's childhood:

Be quick when you switch on the light
and you'll see the dark
was how my father put it:

catch
the otherlife of things
before a look
immerses them.

(‘Fields’, *The Asylum Dance*, p. 42)

In ‘Annunciations’ the divinity in the angel chimes with how a traditional believer would conceptualize the Virgin at this instant: ‘for this moment possessed of an absolute beauty.’ Hovering behind this transcendent, yet physical, beauty is the ineffable, the force that lies under the skin of the material world and that remains subject to perception but beyond description.

The questions posed by the opening of the poem – in whose mind does the angel appear, and why is materiality necessary – resemble the paradoxical conundrums put forth by the faithful throughout the ages in their descriptions of God. Burnside, however, is not posing a devotional conundrum for believers to contemplate; instead he is creating, as he does in many of his poems, a tension between what is predictable, traditional and habitual in our thinking and what is unexpected, contrary and ambiguous in his own thinking. No synthesis of these two outlooks is achieved, nor does one supersede the other. Rather, an enigmatic and shivering sense of possibility is suggested and maintained throughout the poem. This sense gives the writer’s words an aura of ominous under-meaning, because, among other things, they lack resolution. Syntactically, the words are easy to follow; the lucidity and lyricism of Burnside’s writing create an emotional world that the reader can participate in whether or not his meaning is accessible. And his writing, especially that which deals with the numinous, brings up the question of how meaning-driven – how transparent in its conclusions – poetry needs to be in order for it to have an impact on the reader and therefore have value as writing.

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In the second section of ‘Annunciations,’ Burnside reveals something of his writing process – and thereby answers the questions about the angel’s identity by placing the angel as a ‘mental phenomenon’ firmly in the mind of the writer: ‘For any event there are two images: the one I choose and the one I cannot avoid’ (*Common Knowledge*, p. 18).

The first of these images is the well-examined and often-presented image

of the Virgin as a woman in a domestic setting, performing daily tasks and devotions, interrupted by the sudden presence of a robed and winged angel. The second, 'unavoidable' image, is a series of obscure and deviant metaphors: an eye, dark, glittering, reminiscent of moonlight, Egyptian, and the imagined owner of that eye, a woman whose head and body have been shaven.

The distinctness of the *I* throughout this passage, without any association to a thing or an other, suggests that the two images represent the duality of the conscious and subconscious parts of Burnside's mind: the traditional image sited in objective consciousness, and the eye of the shaven woman arising outside the writer's control from the subterranean forces of his mind. The latter image turns the 'idea' of the angel into something other than what is traditionally imagined as angelic, for surely this shaven woman is an analog for the angel: occult, exotically foreign, her bare body newly exposed to the planet's elements and hairless as the embryo forming in the Virgin's womb. The Egyptian woman's manner of appearance resembles the angel's: it is gradual and fraught with a strange portentousness. She goes from an eye peering through a gap between curtains to the head that contains the eye to a woman's naked body.

Once these images are established, the poet's thoughts veer off into a meditation on the soul, about which he shares the Virgin's 'reluctance': 'To begin with, there is some resistance, but at last I succumb to the idea that the soul exists. Or rather, not the soul, but souls.' (p. 18)

Almost every novel and collection of poems written by John Burnside mentions the soul at several points; its existence and its definition are of primary concern to him. It's equally clear that what he defines as the soul is not that non-physical fragment of being associated with the spirit posited by the Catholic religion he was raised in. Although he offers no thorough and complete definition of his concept of the soul, he does propose the following: first, that the soul is connected to the liminal, and its shadow self, becoming; and second, that the soul is not innate and singular but multiple, its many facets created by the relationships of human beings to each other.

Because we aren't born with souls, we become souls, and that becoming is a process of mixing, of one person becoming another, or becoming two, or disappearing into thin air.

(Living Nowhere, p. 246)

In 'Annunciations' he links his idea of multiple souls to his own sense of himself, looping back to the imagined owner of the dark, Egyptian eye:

A shaven woman is the soul of my Spring nights. She has always been there, but I only discover her now. Her complement – my daytime soul – is, on the other hand, something I have often suspected: an old satchel.
(‘Annunciations,’ *Common Knowledge*, p. 18)

Burnside ends this second section of the poem with a description of the items in the satchel of his soul that is precise, counterintuitive and seemingly metaphoric: ‘there are books inside ... the pictures are always changing and the pages smell of raw milk, or ink, or burnt sugar.’ What is surprising, but typical of Burnside’s process, is that his imagined soul and counter-soul are oppositional in some crucial way – in this case, the one is animate, the other not. As before, when the angel oscillated between human and divine aspects, the oppositions catch the reader in the fluctuation between the habitual and the unpredictable. This time it’s as if the poet has reached the bottom rung of some neo-Platonic ladder, moving from ideal to thought to being to thing.

The satchel is one of the iconic objects from Burnside’s personal mythology. It appears in *The Mercy Boys* as well:

It was only after the old man died that Scennie found what he really treasured, packed away in an old suitcase under the bed. A cheap leather bag, crammed with photographs and old letters ... The bag was decorated with ibises and jackal-headed figures, and Scennie realized that it must have been made in Egypt for the tourist trade.
(*The Mercy Boys*, p. 45)

The source of this Egyptian case, in which are kept the photographic emblems of unrealized yearnings and the iconic resolutions of emotions and memories – both of which comprise elements of what Burnside believes constitutes a person’s soul – is revealed in his memoir, *A Lie About My Father*:

My mother’s pictures – photographs of her family, of her friends, of herself on days out with fellow workers from the Co-op, all the scraps and images she treasured – were kept in a large, shabby handbag that my father had brought her from Egypt, when he was stationed out there.
(*A Lie About My Father*, p. 30)

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In the third section of the series, Burnside reverts to the angel and the Virgin, although he remains a commentator as the narrative *I*. The third part opens with a description of the environment surrounding them. They are no longer

creatures of the air or earth but denizens of a watery world. And that wetness is both generative and decaying:

... a night-time green, damp and cool, rooted in leaf-mould and seed.
The angel arrives suddenly, from some near-liquid state, clutching
an olive branch or a lily, or mantled in the perfume of cut grass.
(*Common Knowledge*, p. 19)

Burnside often focuses on the natural world in his poetry, a practice that seems to place him categorically among eco-poets; however, his use of nature seems less about conservation and the politics of the environment and more about his strong tendency toward sensory description in concert with the general disconnection that he seems to feel from the inhabitants of the world, whether human or environmental. Overcoming this disconnection hovers as one of the motivations behind his writing, and his strategy is to approach his subjects vertically rather than horizontally, which is to say, more as things to examine – in a series of increasingly unfamiliar metaphors, which goad emotional reactions and create an affective web within the language – than as a narration that explains and resolves. His instincts are poetic rather than rhetorical, and nature is compatible to this study: it has the virtues of slowness and cyclic repetition. And it is, finally, pervasive: the uninterrupted state of being that through the forces of evolution demands that we are inextricably a part of it.

and you sit
quiet
 amazed by the light
 aware
of everything
 aware of shoals and stars
shifting around you
 endlessly

entwined.
(‘Ports,’ *The Asylum Dance*, p. 3)

Because their particular sounds, smells, movements and visual textures are perceptible, his natural elements – the owls, foxes, grasses, rain and light that inhabit Burnside’s poetry – are as one with human perception and form an entirety. The material world thereby becomes what Burnside calls *pleroma*, the Gnostic concept of the totality of the Divine, or, as Burnside interprets it,

the 'possibility of wholeness,' even though he records the experience of it as an intensely private exchange:

I could imagine we lived on an island, surrounded by something
I could almost feel on my skin, a medium the light or the wind
could enter and roam in at will, sliding in to touch me then moving
away again, leaving only the faintest afterprint on my skin, as if
something had gripped me gently then, just as suddenly, had let go.
(‘Ether,’ *Burning Elvis*, p. 77)

The natural world that introduces the third section of ‘Annunciations’ also recognizes other artists’ contemplation and portrayal of the story: ‘This is one version of the Annunciation, but there are others.’ The ekphrastic features of the poem are interrupted when the poet enters the poem in the first person as a mediating and creative force:

And I cannot help imagining her mind is on something else. In
fact, I have an idea that, a moment before the messenger arrived,
the girl found an ivy leaf pressed between the pages of the book.
(*Common Knowledge*, p. 19)

The book held by the Virgin echoes the image of the books and cards enclosed in the satchel that is Burnside’s daytime soul: ‘The paper was old, and smelled partly of dust, partly of sugar.’ And the ivy leaf quickly morphs into the image of a ‘dried frogskin,’ and the frog into the angel. These images are in the mind of the Virgin who is in the mind of the writer:

I have an idea that the woman cannot separate this image of the frog
from the creature she sees before her: the same colours are present in
his wings, the same near-transparency at the hem of his robe. Perhaps
to her eye, the angel appears to glisten or blink absurdly; perhaps he
seems almost bloodless, and what moisture he contains is mephitic,
fenny, a green that is changing to black. (p. 20)

Burnside now brings this encounter from an ethereal high to an audaciously marshy low. Its mythology has moved from a central moment in Christian doctrine to the folktale of the princess and the frog, also a story of sexuality and the acceptance of fertility. Arguably the two mythologies have equal emotional impact on contemporary readers, but this is another downsizing of a sort and a continuation of the dialectic that is intrinsic to the poem and Burnside’s writing in general.

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In the fourth section of the poem Burnside moves to a meditation on sex and gender. He continues to observe and interpret a painting, or a series of paintings, of the Annunciation, moving back and forth between those images and his re-visioning, thereby inducing a kinetic rather than static relationship between the concepts linked to the images:

Tradition says the angel is male, though it seems unlikely that angels would possess one sex or another ... In the best pictures, it only appears to be male; on closer inspection we see it is neither male nor female, nor can it be called hermaphrodite ... (p. 21)

Within this section of shifting sexuality, Burnside identifies the Virgin with *kore* figures from Greek mythology: 'it is easy to think of her as any soul, just as one might think of any soul as Persephone, or Eurydice.' (p. 21) But again, these classical images signify ideas in the writer's personal mythology and in doing so move away from the static nature of myth:

I was then, and still am, interested in the myth of the young girl or woman who encounters a 'supernatural' force (death, the angel, Dis) and the ways in which that moment is represented in art. It seems to me that these myths are particularly male stories and that the female figure represents back to us that part of the self a boy loses as he passes (with or without the appropriate rituals) into manhood. The loss is not of 'innocence' or even of 'the feminine aspect' of the male, or not to my mind at least – I think it has more to do with a loss of soul, as such, a separation out and confinement of the soul, as boys perform socialised masculinity.
(Personal email, March 2, 2011)

The dialectic between the images and the author's interpretations – sexuality and spirituality, the physical and the ineffable – continues until the end of the poem, which is neat and circular; just as it opens with the appearance of the angel, the poem ends with the disappearance of the Virgin, completing the equation between the two:

The Virgin looks up. This is her moment ... Darkness is coming. There is no sound, no sweetness. For a moment she thinks of a dawn, happening somewhere else, before she disappears.
(*Common Knowledge*, p. 24)

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What Burnside does *not* address in the poems is the central event of the Annunciation: the announcement of the engendering of Christ. He has no need to tell the narrative because the narrative is so well known; it simply hangs in the reader's mind like an obsessive musical refrain. Against its backdrop he places contradictory imagery and shifts away from telling the event as a linear story with a beginning, middle and end. He loops back, moves forward and loops back, over and over, drawing multiple connections between the actors of the story and himself, continuously shifting between how different moments in the event relate to various metaphysical and personal mythologies.

Birth – and its subsidence, death – as a form of storytelling is more often associated with a singular, iconic moment in which a living being passes from one state to another, one of which is imperceptible and unknowable. For the imaginative, that moment of passage is too fraught with mystery to be simply a historical moment, or a piece of data. In *The Locust Room*, the young Paul, on the edge of becoming an adult, expresses this:

... he had been mulling over the story of Orpheus ... which said that Orpheus could make things – rocks, trees, even animals – come into being merely by singing It wasn't that Orpheus actually created animals and plants out of nothing, like the Christian God ... It was more that the essential creative act was one of seeing, and making seen, for the first time, the true nature of the world.

(*The Locust Room*, pp. 174–175)

In Burnside's work, *perception is birth*, to which re-telling is a necessary adjunct. His poems are often lists or series of perceived details, each of which seems of the highest existential significance. Burnside's understanding of creation as the natural world into which humans are inextricably woven is a hybrid of animistic perceptions and Christian aseity. And by affecting this merger, he is able to wrest away the spiritual language of institutional religion and recharge it with new vitality. He also changes our sense of myth as an unchanging story.

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It would be easy to ascribe Burnside's perception of 'the true nature of the world' – as a shifting field of 'something' sacred at the edges of perception – to his experimentation with drugs in early adulthood. Certainly Burnside has

and dangerous parent, needed to develop the ability to read small signs on the surface of his father's body and movements, signs that would warn him of impending violence, verbal even more than physical, so that he could forge a protection of mental displacement.

(*A Lie About My Father*, pp. 31–32)

One question that his father posed to him as a form of unrelenting cruelty and that lingered in his child mind, was whether or not Burnside should have lived, once he had been born:

'You know you had a sister once.'

...

I nodded dutifully. I knew all this. I knew what was coming. I just didn't understand why.

'And she died.'

Once upon a time, there was a little Indian boy who lived by himself in a cave in the mountains. He was all alone in the world, except for his friend, the timber wolf –

'But you know what?'

This boy had no parents, only the wolf, whose name was –

'It could have been you that died.'

Mungo. Chano. White Fang. I would try names out in my head, but I could never find one I liked.

'It could have been the other way around. You could have died, and she could have lived.' (p. 34)

Burnside seldom uses italics in his writing, and in this passage they do not signify emphasis or an interior voice. Rather, they signify an escape into a mythic world in which his young life is safe, protected by a friendly animal. Birth, death and stories of an elemental nurturing of a solitary child are hard-wired into Burnside's world; writing, the making of stories, is his life jacket.

Equally, however, his creative process is linked with isolation and with an obliteration of the self, especially that identity of personal history, the accumulation of commonplace events, which are the result of interaction with others:

I never worked first thing in the morning. After a night's painting, I would have a pot of tea, then go for a walk. There was a process going on that I didn't think too much about, a process of erasure, where everything that had happened the day before ... everything extraneous

was erased and forgotten. It was a necessary ritual, this process of erasure: I had to become myself again, a non-person, someone with no defined identity, without family or friends, or fixed abode. (*Living Nowhere*, p. 318)

The disappearance of the Virgin at the end of ‘Annunciations,’ is not a reference to her future death, but rather her subsidence, like Burnside’s, into a state of creativity. And the ultimate encounter in this long prose poem is not the one between the angel and the Virgin, or Burnside and his past, but the one he offers up to the reader: the encounter between the soul of the writer and the soul of the reader.

He wanted something akin to that moment at the end of *Zabriskie Point*, where Daria Halprin sees the house in the desert exploding. The critics, his friends, so many people he knew had failed to appreciate that moment, because the beauty of it was too remote, too detached from what people thought of as narrative. Yet, for Paul, it had signaled the beginning of a long process ... towards the impossible which was, in every meaningful sense, the fundamental ground of whatever he could think of as reality (*The Locust Room*, p. 27)

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Maitreyabandhu

Near-Belonging

I hurry out to the coal shed as fast as I can in my oversized Wellingtons, then scuttle indoors with the loaded bucket, to get back into the warm, but today I hesitate a while on the back steps and I begin to sense what I have known is there all along. I don't know what it is, but I sense, every time I go out, that something is all around me in the blue gloom, something live for sure, something as curious and blood-warm as myself...

John Burnside: *Dreaming A Buffalo*

John Burnside is describing getting the coal in when he was seven years old. He senses something animating the near-dark at the back of the house: 'and, though I see nothing in the lilac, or in the privet that sets our prefab apart from the neighbouring houses, I feel that whatever it is – a lone creature, or some more collective presence, I can't tell – is watching me'. This numinous presence, this sense of being 'close to the creaturely world' haunts Burnside's poetry. 'What singles this moment out [...] is a sense of near-belonging – not of *being connected* (as the greenbabblers would have it) but of the complex mesh of kinship and differences that characterises any animal encounter [...].'¹

This sense of being 'close to the creaturely world' and, as a consequence, becoming more 'creaturely' himself is a constant theme in Burnside's work. I want to explore the human significance of this 'near-belonging'. I want to say that from a Buddhist point of view, our capacity to directly sense the life around us is foundational to any genuine spiritual life.²

Burnside's feeling for the natural world finds many different modes of expression in his poems – from the apparently anecdotal to the seemingly sacred. His sense of living in a world that is alive in the same way as he is alive – is expressed in terms of interchange-ability, of men reincarnated as animals; as nature populated by the dead; as shapeshifting and haunting; as parables of disappearance; as self and world mysteriously interacting, flowing into each other, defining and re-defining each other; as annunciation and as visitation. I want to choose just one journey through the poems – a journey in a car.

¹ 'Dreaming A Buffalo'. *Poetry Review*, 100:3,p.57-9. Autumn 2010

² I am very much indebted to my teacher Urgyen Sangharakshita (founder of the Triratna Buddhist Order/Community) and Dharmachari Subhuti. My direct source is an article by them entitled 'Re-imagining the Buddha', 2010.

And nothing is more mysterious
than here:

this morning,
when we venture from the road

into a realm of shades
and fairy rings,

to claim this negative
of grass and night,

where rabbits scatter
from our turning light,

and, somewhere in the grass,
an insect sings.

(‘Birth Songs’)

This extract, from his 2002 collection, *The Light Trap*, is Burnside in apparently anecdotal mode: the poem begins, ‘These are the days/of junk food at 4 a.m.’ The important experience here is of stepping out of a car in the very early morning and how, with the turning off of the ignition, our mechanical, technological world stops and we step into ‘mysterious’ nature where ‘rabbits scatter from our turning light’.

We had stopped the car and were out
in the wide dark of the pampas,
scanning the numberless stars for the Southern Cross
while the diver sat at the wheel, with his maté and beads [...]

(‘In Argentina’)

This time, Burnside’s poem (from his 2005 collection, *The Good Neighbour*) takes us out of the car into Argentine night and ‘a sour-water stink/crossing the river of highway that ran to Brazil’. It is the smell of a skunk: a smell that ‘stayed in my head for days’ while the ‘old creatures hurried away to their holts and lairs/at the edge of my mind’. The poem concludes by describing

[...] the creatures I never see
but scent, from time to time, in the starry dark,
brothers from somewhere near Eden, whose blood is my own.

The metaphor of stepping out of a car to look at the stars – and in so doing catching the ancient stink of a skunk – reminds me of our fundamental intimacy with the natural world in contrast with the increasingly artificial, technologically mediated environment in which we spend most of our time. (Nowadays cars have so much complicated wiring and computer technology that it won't be long before we have to wire up a laptop just to change a wheel!) For me, the car is an image for the modern world – mechanical, technological, media soaked – a completely constructed environment in which you can adjust the weather, order a breeze. Interestingly, in this poem the driver with his conventionally religious 'maté and beads' stays in the car.

On certain nights, when everyone is sleeping,
I drive out into the meadows to watch the bats,
alone in the car, with the windows all the way down
for the cool of the air and the quiet beyond the village [...]
(‘Rain’)

This poem (from his 2009 collection, *The Hunt in the Forest*) has Burnside once again in his car at night when ‘everyone is sleeping’. Burnside is the poet of the late night vigil, the early morning drive; and it often creates this atmosphere of suspension – of our world of repetitive social relations being deferred while another deeper world appears. As he put it in *Dreaming a Buffalo*: ‘creaturely kinship is a tentative and tenuous process’. This time it's bats he's come to see:

dipping out of the trees
slipping from lit to dark, from seen to unseen,
in the waver of headlamps, all wingbeat and blur in the chill
that comes, after hours of rain [...]

The bats' ‘seen to unseen’ ushers-in of the dead are

no longer sleeping, or lying awake,
though the spirit is creeping, inchwise, through
mortar and blood,
unpicking the fabric, renewing the face of the earth.

Again that distinctive Burnside music – meditative, estranged, and yet intimate – a sense of flickering between worlds, between living and dead, seen and unseen: ‘all wingbeat and blur in the chill/that comes, after hours of rain, from the still of the woods [...]

This is a brief journey through Burnside's poems: stepping out of his car into 'a realm of shades/and fairy rings'; walking into the Argentinean night to scan 'the numberless stars for the Southern Cross'; winding the car windows down to feel the cool air and watch bats flicker through the 'waver the headlamps'. I could have chosen other journeys – angels and metamorphosis, the ordinary becoming extraordinary then ordinary again. All of them are touched, are heightened, by his instinct for 'creaturely life'.

And this sensibility strikes me as being essentially *animist*; not in the sense of worshipping the old gods – Woden or Lleu Llaw Gyffes – not in the New-Age sense of druids and stone circles and face-paint, but in a genuine, articulated sense that can never be reduced to words. It is the feeling of *living among the living* – among bats and crane flies, badgers and rain. It is a kind of imaginative empathy: an unmediated, intuitive resonance with the natural world. Burnside's poems exemplify a sense of animistic mystery, a resonance of life for life – my life vibrating with the life of things around me.

It is a sensibility we all need. Pre-modern men and women lived in a world populated by spirits and gods who needed to be honoured and propitiated if one was to have a successful life. Every feature of the landscape was alive. People felt themselves to be part of a living universe, one they could communicate and interact with; a natural order that was as curious and watchful of them as they were of it. They felt their 'near-belonging', their 'complex mesh of kinship'. For the first time in world history, as far as we know, we have an increasingly worldwide culture that has no place for this animistic imagination – a culture that scorns it, feels superior to it. Many people perceive the world as essentially dead. Of course there's great value in our rejection of animism – sloughing off the superstition that went with it, the exploitation that usually accompanied it, the dark-age ignorance – but alongside that came the severing of our connection with the natural world: the atrophy of kinship.

Burnside, it seems to me, feels this loss very keenly. And of course it is a loss in our personal as well as our cultural life. Many of us felt a kinship with nature as children. I could have taken another journey through Burnside's poems – back to that our childhood sense of trees being *alive*, rather than being mere arboreal specimens, to Burnside as a child going out to get the coal or walking into fog. Take, for instance, the title poem of *The Light Trap*, where Burnside and a friend use 'a car-torch and a stolen/bedsheet from the upstairs linen press' to catch moths:

Homesick for the other animals,
at midnight, in the soft midsummer dark,
we rigged a sail of light amidst

the apple trees beyond your mother's lawn
and counted moths.

From a Buddhist point of view, this is the fundamental ground of our ethical life: this natural empathy, this feeling that the world is alive in the same way we are alive. Natural ethics (as apposed to conventional morality; the codified behaviour of the tribe) arises out of this sense of solidarity with life – our breathing with it, our imaginative identity with apple trees and moths. From this germinal ‘feeling-with’ arises our adult sense of the reality of others. The ability to empathise with others is an imaginative act; it is Shelley’s: ‘The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, word, action or person not our own.’ This ‘going out of our own nature’ arises from a broader, more foundational ‘near-belonging’. At best this ‘animism’ (as I’m calling it) is a direct, instinctive empathy with things – beyond the purview of reasoned reflection, eco-consciousness or climate-change anxiety.³ It is a resonance with the world, a sense of life communicating with life below the normal range of consciousness. In this *ethical* sense, our task, as we grow older, is to lose our naivety but retain our innocence, our animistic empathy. This is one of the great tasks of poetry; a task exemplified by Burnside’s poems.⁴

But another vitally important aspect of life has its roots in our kinship with nature: the aesthetic sense. The Pragmatist Philosopher, John Dewey thought that our aesthetic sense was derived from the simple pleasures of nature – knocking a burning log with a poker to watch the sparks, skimming a stone across a lake, listening for our echo (rhyme must have evolved from this effortless pleasure). Out of these mud pies and kindergarten scribbles come the arts. Our aesthetic sense is one of the main ways in which we apprehend ‘meaning’ – in the concert hall, in the gallery, reading a volume of Burnside’s poems.

Once childhood is over, we often lose our innate imaginative empathy

³ Just to be clear, I’m not advocating self-conscious paganism or tree worship; I’m not encouraging the sentimental fallacy or back-to-the land agrarianism. I’m not doing this and neither is John Burnside. He (and I) are not trying to worship nature, we are trying to feel our kinship with it – but not as ideology, not as ‘environmental awareness’ or direct action (essential though they are), but as imaginative empathy.

⁴ Recently, I was fortunate enough to see Michael Longley launch his new book of poems, *A Hundred Doors*. Longley is 72 years old, and yet there is something of the innocent about him, despite his intellectual rigour and formal mastery. One poem ‘On the Shetlands’ describes a Shetland pony: ‘His hoof-prints fill with rain and inspire me/ My hobbling, diminutive Pegasus.’ The evening felt like a testimony to wonder and empathy kept alive: the curious child still watchful in the elderly man. It made me proud of poetry.

– especially in a world dominated by materialist assumptions. Since the English Romantics, poetry has been one of the ways modern culture has kept imaginative animism alive. Burnside is part of that tradition. We read his poems for the sheer pleasure of it – for no ‘reason’. But that reading will also help us rediscover our ‘complex mesh of kinship and differences’, our capacity to sense the life around us.

We live in a highly constructed environment dominated by media and technology. I’ve used the car as an instance of that. And of course I’m not saying technology is *a bad thing* – from CT scans to central heating and the World Wide Web, technology has made life easier, bearable, *better* for millions of people. It’s the age-old question of how we use it; and there’s plenty of evidence to suggest we’re not using it very well. We’re spending more and more time emailing, surfing the net, playing video games, blogging, and YouTubing. We live in an information-glut: advertising is trying to own and then manipulate our attention in order to make us buy things. Life is increasingly artificial. Even our food is artificial – ‘These are the days/of junk food at 4a.m.’ Compared with apps and iPhones, the natural world can seem boring. Compared to doing 80mph on the motorway, nature can seem very *slow*. Technology is alienating us from nature – from our own nature, as well as from the natural world.

‘I consider the animal and plant life around me, not as metaphors, or emblems, but as living forms, with whom I would discover a continuity.’⁵ I most reliably discover *my* continuity on retreat. On retreat you leave your laptop at home; you turn off your phone; you live a life of sustaining routine – meditating and sharing time together. There are periods of silence. In other worlds you let your mind settle so that it becomes quiet enough to rediscover your empathy with the natural world. We all need this kind of space – whether or not we go on retreat. But modern life isn’t going to help us. We’re going to have to make an effort to turn off our phone, to stop checking our emails. We’re going have to make an effort to go for a walk without our MP3 player. Reading Burnside’s poems can help us find motivation. His poetry reminds us of our ‘near-belonging’ – reveals it to us in wonderfully judged language. At the very least, we can turn off the road, get out of the car, and step out into the verge where ‘somewhere in the grass/ an insect sings’.

⁵ John Burnside. PBS Bulletin, Summer 2002.

Alan Stubbs

Reading Burnside

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The World becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
of dead and living.

(T S Eliot: 'East Coker', *Four Quartets*)

In the hectic pub of a Friday night, being delighted to have been approached to write this piece, I asked a poet friend what he thought of John Burnside's poetry. We both had had a few pints by then, and he simply said 'Gothic,' just that. I talked awhile about the art of 'making strange' and the uniqueness of Burnside's voice and vision, of what I liked, and of his influence. But later, when I was thinking about it, that word, 'Gothic' reasserted itself. My friend was re-reading *Dracula* in order to teach it, and was no-doubt influenced by this in his response to me. But there was something there, I felt. Burnside's poems possess something of the Romantics or their view of Nature, of the inter-connectedness of things, and of an 'other' that makes strange, and then something else. A something of those fascinations that we have as children with those things of the world that we learn later to shy away from. Of attributions of power. Or perhaps it is something of the rawness of the naked stare. Something uncomfortable.

As preparation I read his poems again, all of those that I have in book-form, and the many printed in the *London Review of Books*. I also went back and re-read all of his articles and memoirs that I possess. And then returned to the poems. The words, images, stresses, reading them aloud to fix a hold on what it is that I find important there. The themes, and the ways that they are arranged so that the reader has to step on from one thought, or image, to the next. And is forced, like that neighbour who is taking apart the clocks that she collects in his poem, 'A normal skin', to lay out all of the pieces, and then, after considering them, and the fact of their being realised here, and 'unravelling' in such a stop of time, to attach meaning. To make what are often very personal and dangerously-edged connections. Ones that could hurt, or open up the self to something else.

Reading a Burnside poem is to feel a surrender of the self to a train of thought that diverges then out along the many pathways of associations that can occur. They connect up patterns of thought, and map them out into landscapes that feel as if they are as familiar to us, and removed from us, as those places that we knew well as children. The poems have the feeling of

allowing us to see again, and briefly occupy, and feel out from and away along the newly discovered strangenesses of ordinary things. They have lines such as ‘lining the others in rows for the Instamatic’, or ‘breathing through water, waiting to capture my soul’, which occur in his poem ‘A distant cousin,’ and which simultaneously transport and render the familiar unfamiliar.

Although many of the poems are local and homely in their concerns, and have a biographical content, reading the poems just as biographical testimony, making reference to, for example, Burnside’s own documented mental health problems in the 1980s, or the fact that he shared the womb with an unborn twin, or his relationship with his parents, would, I think, unfairly limit them. The poems are strong and reach out through the familiars of family and landscape to speak of what it is to be conscious in the unconcerned world. A world where the existence of every thing is precarious.

The impulse behind Burnside’s writing may, like every writer, derive from his own experience, but I think that the writing stands, and should be read and understood purely on its own terms.

Consider his fine poem ‘The solitary in autumn.’

I am standing out in the yard
at the end of October,
building a fire of drifted leaves and twigs,
letters for kindling, apples amongst the flames,
the last of summer, dropping through the embers.

There is that perfume in the shade
that is almost viburnum,
traces of snow and water in the light,
a blankness along the canal
that waits to be filled

and, given the silence, given the promise of frost,
I might have welcomed this as something else:
the taste of windfalls moving on the stream
a faint god’s partial emergence
through willow and alder.

The riverbank darkens and fades.
The garden recovers its creatures: slow worms and frogs
and blackbirds sifting the dead
in the still of the damsons.
Across the river, evening bleeds the trees,

my neighbour's garden blurs to smoke and rain,
sometimes I think that someone else is there,
standing in his own yard, raking leaves,
or bending to a clutch of twigs and straw
to breathe a little life into the fire.

This poem moves out, like the Viburnum (a plant of the guelder-rose and wayfaring tree genus) does, whilst remaining rooted. The I that is 'standing out in the yard at the end of October' awaits the 'promise' of things to come. In the final stanza, however, the I that started the poem has lost his or her rooted place in the world, and has become so dislocated as to be viewing him or herself from an outside. Is busy breathing a little life into a fire of 'letters for kindling, apples amongst the flames, the last of summer, dropping through the embers.'

The poem's title, 'The solitary in autumn', indicates that it is concerned with the aloneness of all of those things that it speaks about. The solitary I, the fire, the individual letters and the apples which here are not 'conspiring with him how to load and bless', or 'filled with ripeness to the core', as in Keats poem 'To Autumn', but are 'windfalls', solitary like the snow and the water. Everything here has the state of being solitary. And everything is included within the frame of the poem. It is a poem of loss, the loss of life that occurs at the onset of winter, but it is also a poem that speaks of an emptying of the self, and links this to the change of season. It is as if we are all 'faint gods' only partially emerged that will retreat until the spring comes. That must use their letters for kindling, as if the act of making and tending to a fire is necessary to bring about that rebirth of things that happens in spring, or might resurrect us if we have already passed over the river and been bled, like the trees are.

Read over again, and again, the poem takes on the quality of a chant or incantation to ward off that banishment of the self that might occur along with the emptying of the world of things. And like a child's good spell, it tells us that to hold to the possibility of return we must do something, must kindle the fire of life with letters. With poems, perhaps.

And this image of tending a fire immediately calls to mind another of Burnside's poems, 'Burning a Woman,' which prompts to another quality of his work: that the poems read together have a cumulative quality, and are like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, or fragments of a mirror. They are parts of a greater whole that they are then, themselves when read, being fixed onto, altered and altering. Sometimes a story whole will emerge. Sometimes a landscape that is both receptive of and reflective of the whole. And this is

an additional joy in the reading of the poems. That they add, one to another, building up layers of meaning.

Consider the use of the word ‘kindle’, in the first section, ‘Scotlandwell’ of Burnside’s fine poem ‘An Essay Concerning Light.’

a constant flicker, like the run of thought
that keeps us from ourselves, although it seems
to kindle us, and make us plausible

So, what are the concerns of Burnside’s poetry? It is a poetry of landscape and light, of the self, death, loss, reincarnation, bodies, the everyday, isolation, and the strange. All of these things, of course, are also the concerns of the Gothic, and of Romantic poetry. Burnside attributes landscape and weather to speak to us tentatively about the inner self, and again this is a tendency of the Gothic. However his language is simple, and plain, in the best sense, not hyperbolic. He speaks directly to us without mystification, presenting a series of things, or happenings and allowing them to tell. His poetry is not much concerned with events outside in ‘big society’, it does not have any discernible political drive or ideology, but includes ordinary people and holds to what is close. It reminds of much of the fine poetry coming from America today. It is a personal and charged poetry inhabited by the self in isolation. It could be said to be existential perhaps in its outlook, yet it reaches, is philosophical, exploratory, and seems to feel its way in and out of the world carefully so as to disturb things as little as possible. Also, it seems to me to be compulsive, in the sense that when I read it, I cannot imagine that he could not write it. It is simultaneously effortless and much fretted over, and seems a way of understanding what is necessary. It occurs to me that I would be interested to know just how he writes. Is it every day? Does he hear a music that decides on the length of each line, on the rhythm? Does he know where a poem is going to, or what exactly it is about, when he begins?

I was gladdened, on reading Burnside’s piece in the *Poetry Review* – ‘Mind The Gap: On Reading American Poetry’, to find that he reads and admires much of the work of American poets, such as Jorie Graham, and John Ashberry, and, knowing this, it is possible to perceive an influence here, certainly in the freedom of structure of the poems. And perhaps in the way that he will use images, one after the other as if they are a counterpoint subtly changing the tone. Or even shifting the poem radically from what is real to a vision, or to a level of a heightened reality.

In the body of the article, Burnside mentioned that as a child he happened upon a tin of that golden syrup that came in a green and gold tin ‘illustrated with a picture of a lion, dead and rotting in the dust, a wave of bees digging in

beneath the skin and hair, rendering honey from the dark flesh’, and said that this was his first brush with metaphor – ‘a metaphor of change and continuity that meant more, at some private level of spirit, than the public imagery of church.’ And this explains perhaps his poetry’s constant reaching for meaning, often a meaning found in a perceived connectedness of all things, and the developing interest of his poetry in philosophical themes.

In an interview with Burnside that I watched on the internet, (he was at a launch of his book, *Glister*, in Germany), he said that a character in that novel is a man who collects moths. Immediately I thought of Elizabeth Bishop’s fine poem, ‘The Man-Moth’. Like much of Burnside’s poetry, this poem has Gothic overtones. It is concerned with the inner world. And with Man’s striving bravely to seek out something sublimely exterior to himself, whilst aware all the time of the strange otherness of everything else that seems ordinary, all about him. The poem speaks of an oppressed loneliness, utilising fantastic (almost science fiction) imagery. And, in the final image of the poem, the Man-Moth emerges to visit the surface, and is caught, and when caught he must give up a tear from his eye, his only possession, that is like a bee’s sting, that – if you are paying attention – he’ll hand over to you, as ‘cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink.’ And I think, finally, that this is the idea of the Gothic that I am comfortable with applying to Burnside’s poetry. A sort of Expressionistic one. For me, his poetry shines a light, both out to the fires of the world and in through the dark of the pupil, whilst recognising the fragility and changeability of that very light, and all that it connects. And it shares with us the tears of its own humanity.

Finally, in a letter titled ‘Candy-Coloured’ that Burnside wrote to the *London Review of Books* (LRB 27th August 2009) in response to an article by Michael Robbins, (LRB, 6 August 2009), he talks about those American poets such as Wallace Stevens, Charles Wright, and Charles Simic who have continued to publish vital and challenging work, (that is candy- coloured?) as they have settled into old age. Whilst this may well be premature, I would like to express the hope that John Burnside will continue to publish his vital and challenging (candy-coloured too, if he so wishes) works long into the future.

Sources:

Poems: 'A normal skin', 'The solitary in autumn', and 'Burning a woman' are taken from Penguin Modern Poets series featuring John Burnside, Robert Crawford, Kathleen Jamie

'An Essay Concerning Light' was taken from *London Review of Books* (v30/n06)

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