

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS 6

Journals are inspiring, intimate and accessible, offering keys to their authors. Gide, Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Yeats et al. wrote journals, both for public and private consumption, that intrigue, whether in diary, essay or letter forms. In them can be discovered the seeds of the creative impulse, secrets revealing the concerns and craft of writing, the climate of the day, even personal confessions.

Earlier in this series of **Notes for Broadsheet Poets**, (available in *Agenda* and online), for example, Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Letters to a Young Poet' were cited, as were Yeats' Letters to Dorothy Wellesley. Each of these groups of 'Letters' comprises a kind of 'Poet's Journal', containing advice and tips for young poets. Another particularly relevant and startlingly articulate discovery is the '**Poet's Journal**' of **Pádraic Fallon**, the highly respected Irish poet and verse dramatist, born in 1905, whose *Collected Poems* were published by Carcanet in 1990. Fallon asks the very question that *Agenda*'s present editor has asked regarding the 'young **Broadsheet** poets: 'What is a young writer? And what is an old writer?' As was suggested in the first **Notes for Broadsheet Poets**, a poet can be a 'young poet' at eighty if he has just started writing poetry and found his voice. Or, as Fallon cites, 'Yeats was a young man at seventy, Higgins was old at forty.'

In *A Poet's Journal & Other Writings 1934-1974*, edited by Brian Fallon and published by The Lilliput Press in 2005, Fallon's timeless poetic credo or testament can be found. This comprises ten instalments written from September 1951 to November 1952, for the well-known journal *The Bell*. This lively, at times contentious, eccentric, poetic credo or 'Journal', is written in a chatty, accessible, even ironic witty style. Refreshingly, Fallon is never obsequious and has the guts to write off Eliot, Pound and Yeats at various stages in their careers before restoring them in part to their pedestals. e.g. 'Pound's Cantos were built to express the whole vision of the poet by using all his material. In that they were successful. He uses an art-form in which he can be mythic and moronic in the same space of a line. He can be stately and slummy, cryptic, gnomic and diffusive on the one page.' A little later he adds: 'When Pound started eating up continents, from Chicago to Cathay, Marc Apollo circling the globe, well, he needed a way to disgorge his giant eating, something so formless that it must be a form in itself, a book that has eaten up all the books.' In general, though, the Journal not only registers Fallon's poetic and dramatic principles as he struggles for a constructive synthesis; it also represents a guide to younger, fledgeling Irish poets. In it are real gems.

Fallon's allegiance about which he was not dogmatic, as Brian Fallon recounts in his introduction to *A Poet's Journal & Other Writings*, 'was to an imagistic type of poetry, with its roots in Symbolism but also in the Elizabethans and Metaphysicals; the type of quasi-journalistic verse that became popular from the thirties onwards seemed to him to compromise fatally with prose thinking and prose logic'.

As is the tradition in *Agenda*, and as evidenced above, Fallon challenges fashionable cults and idols with his risqué, incisive comments, describing fashion as 'the merest commonplace', adding a wisecrack: 'The clique always stands for a cliché.' Like *Agenda*, too, he reviewed and encouraged the early work of such poets as Ted Hughes, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, and Thomas Kinsella. Fallon also showed considerable interest - after he was an active reviewer - in the early work of, among others, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Eavan Boland, before he died in 1974.

It is hoped that the following quotations by this spirited magus startle, inspire, inform, enlighten and amuse as they add to the eternal cultural debate. I think Fallon would be delighted today for his profound musings and questions to arouse strong reactions whether of agreement, disagreement, intellectual ruminations, or applause...

From *A Poet's Journal II*:

What is poetry anyway? A display of personality or a vision of reality? Can it be both in one poem?

What then about yourself? Will you chuck the stanza-trunks and walk naked?

From *A Poet's Journal III*:

...The mystic way of speech is returning, the art of double and treble meanings, the concentration on the image, the variety and individuality of theme, good writing.

Words. Poems are written with them. Not with soul, not with spirit. With words. Mallarmé.

Poetry is made of words, said Mallarmé. But a poem is a series of continuous and immediate inspirations, one word borrowing another, and the poet has not very much choice about them. He will use the words that strike matches in his Unconscious, when he has them; he will use others disdainfully to plug holes when he hasn't, going back again to find the right ones later, the misfires.

I had to treat this country as if it was in my mind, that is, as it had come to me through folksong and folktale, and as I had lived it in fair and market, in town and country, a boy amongst his own people, who was lucky enough to have contacted the last remnants of the old Gaelic-speaking life and felt it reflected in the attitude of the community. Why, I used to holiday in houses where one man would recite Raftery's poems to another, where a boycotted landlord used to pass by under the protection of sweating policemen, where the Land War was still a real thing, where men working in a field would run a mile to see a horse gallop, where eighteenth-century recklessness lasted well into my time at fairs and race-meetings, where beggars talked John Millington Synge, and every man was an individual, the big house in the background dying into inanition. The Ireland of my youth connected me historically with the eighteenth century, but it was an emotional connection too, a joy in just living, in delighting in active things, in kicking up, like a young colt, one hell of a dust.

There is more to life than the despair of life. There is this body-joy in its own energies.....There is measure and number in all things, but you discover them through excess.

A man takes his body from his parents, but his psyche is all man's. He is the history of the world. All times in all men.

Man's relations with the Gods are never out of date. They have the inner relevance of a neurosis. Complexes of urge and energy...

From *A Poet's Journal IV*:

Every writer knows his vocation from his schooldays and his attitude towards the world is born in him. It is the spirit-skeleton within the skeleton, and all his urge is to get this plain to himself... One's philosophy of life, indeed, consists of a long series of revulsions, each revulsion being a broken marriage of some kind or other. We skin-strip till we find the skeleton...

Most poets consider their own stuff the best there is, and all their criticism is consciously or unconsciously a propaganda for their own kind of poetry... If we accept a critic's job at all, we have to allow for personal bias and for one's own indecent motives.

No poet is ever a settled man; daily he builds his psyche anew, his everyday world, and it is a truism that one poet stimulates another to the building.

There is a daily logic somehow in the visual things the day presents, and if we kill the eye we see ourselves no better for being blind. Even in verse, if we do not bring things to the visual point, if we do not stamp words with the prints of things, we lose in direct strength and challenge.

The visual, however, is neither the real nor the realistic, but a help to communication, a lighting along the pathway that leads into the image. All good poetry must end in the image, and the image is a complex made visible, the end and the all.

Each poem is different from any other and demands its own kind of language and approach, demands and enforces it, indeed, and a poem fails only when the poet does not follow the poem faithfully in the kind of language it wants from him. To do that he must kill the idea of style, of one personal style, which was about the only serious limitation that Yeats had since it confined him to subjects that lent themselves to lordly utterance.

From *A Poet's Journal V*:

I believe that no poem of any use is ever made without some degree of possession, and when a poet is in that state he is something else than himself.

Whatever it is, it is dependent on the poet for its temporary expression, for its time-body, and the poet is dependent also upon it, for the words that well up from line to line, for the integrated passion of the utterance. I am tired of people who look on writing as a mere craft, but not as weary of them as of those who regard the writer's voice as the voice of God.

A Pre-Raphaelite doctrine, maybe. Emotion is everything... The best example could be Dante who made poetry out of his ruin, or Baudelaire, who lived ruin in order to feel it, de Nerval who went mad that he might know emotion from the other side of things, all the eccentrics of life who were forced to dramatise an attitude so that they could feel, so that they could feed that abstract person within with the passions of life.

And poor Pound, escaping from it all his life, to be caught up by it at last in a cage-camp in Italy.

So my feeling is that a man is a projection in time of a personality outside time, a dual thing that could work each way, and while I needn't believe in this with the absoluteness of a doctrine, I can use it as most poets use any doctrine, as a working hypothesis, as fuel in the stove, as the negative and positive currents that come together in the bulb and throw some light into the room. Even Euripides, who scanted the Gods, was aware of other worlds.

And how much of feeling is suggestion? When I ask myself this, the void around me gapes. I question my own authenticity. I am confronted, like Baudelaire, with the horror of emptiness. And that itself is an emotion...

It is this up-against-it feeling that does make us creators, make us turn on special aspects of living so that the heart beats again.

The thing about form is that there comes a time when it becomes formal. Then it controls thought rather than releases it, and pens the poet in a convention.

Form, of course, is always necessary. Some subject, indeed, will demand a rigid scheme or there will be a stumbling and a halting and a churning all over the place, and a consequent loss in rhythmic value.

And the rhythm is the thing, the undercurrent and undertow that counterpoise the onward rush. But the learned stanza carrying its rhymes like airs and graces has ceased, I think, to be part of our time and makes me think of something I read somewhere in Proust's occasional writings. He said that initially the great inventors of art in the nineteenth century were all regarded as vulgar by the public, no matter how the critics stressed their contacts with the artists who went before them. They had to lower the expression to compete with the changing psyche.

The poet's obscure vision of reality, indeed, is never apparent to himself until he is getting it into words. Then the battle is joined. And in the queerest way he must yield up the greater part of his brilliant equipment, discard his facility and his dictionary, throttle his eloquence, and kill a thousand metaphors, if he is to find that something new that makes his hair stand up with triumph. If he takes the easy way of his facility, he will substitute something else for his actual vision....

I look for the VISION.

From *A Poet's Journal VI*:

...For most of us it is the suffering of matter that makes us speak, an ancient consciousness that we have as our first mission to transmit the cry of things beyond ourselves. Man is mythic not logical, Aeschylean and not Socratic, and when Plato burned his poems and founded his optimistic god on syllogisms of sophistries he gave us the university of the atom bomb.

All men, indeed, aspire naturally to the condition of art, for the problem of the duality of the world is solved, not by a logic, but by an aesthetic. There is neither good nor evil in the poetic cry, there is only a singleness, an acceptance of the haphazard will that inhabits the universe...

...The significances of myth are always with the poet, always in the poet. And whatever redactions of primeval feelings were in the gods are still active and move through us in metaphor and image. It is our job to give those currency, and in a Socratic world make them available to feeling again.

I have never spoken in a language I trusted. I have always necessarily upholstered myself with the properties of communication, as if I were an American footballer taking the field. All modern art is a compromise, and the poet wears a fleece so that he may walk with the flock.

The essence of an art is to the whole. And that is the trouble. The wholeness eludes us. We are the poets of fragments, our apparatus always out of order.

Il y a dans l'acte de l'amour une grande ressemblance avec la torture ou avec une opération chirurgicale.

Those eternal mirrors of the modern man, this broken sensibility that sees itself by contraries. We constantly find ourselves in the arms of our opposites. We find our faith only by denial of it, as if the denial itself were a declaration of faith. And yet it is this kind of art we have to use if we are to get at the truth in ourselves and leave it free to affect others, a kind of truth by self-deception. There is no plain speech, there is only a large reading between the lines.

From *A Poet's Journal VII*:

Poetry should renew itself in every decade by refining itself from those impurities of time and place which give it a kind of temporary body in current taste... There is no such thing as pure poetry. There is a soul and a body in all things, the ideal form and its earth equivalent; but the earth form must alter in time and space and it is through this earth form that the ideal must speak to us. That is the current language of art; and like any other language it is always in the course of amending its meanings.

In admitting everything to our verse, we lessen the formal value of the statement. We forget we speak of the permanent and *for* the permanent. We intrude ourselves, that current Selfhood which most of the poets of the past distinguished from the identity, from the *moi profonde*, from the timeless soul. This soul is the poet's concern. And the revelation of it must be his art.

Nothing can exist in art as it exists in life. The artist connects one to the other. He is the meeting point at which they contemplate one another. He is the meeting point at which they contemplate one another, two imponderables making mystic marriage, a poet making a poem. But because a poet must use a language which is abstracted from a current vocabulary and which must keep all the hints of its original if it is *to satisfy a man who speaks for his own time*, most poems cease to be poetry after a couple of generations of use. They 'fade on the page', as Robert Graves says: only the permanent continues its life, that thing in which the extraneous elements were least and the poet's time-body the least emphatic. The history of poetry is a history of lost causes and spent emotions, high indignations and high horses equally dust. What carries a poem is its language; the meaning that oozes through words like so much

many-coloured oil is a matter of sound and syllables and nothing commonsensical that may be determined by any prose-précis.

A poem will find a poet.

One of Rilke's secrets, for instance, is that he brings forward the abstract noun into the foreground so that the foreground is thinned to a gauze, the poem, then, becoming a series of perspectives that run away back into some infinity, 'l'éternité qui gronde à l'horizon, la destiné où la fatalité qu'on aperçoit intérieurement sans qu'on puisse dire à quelles signes on la reconnaît!' Realism has the pictorial appeal, but as Yeats said long ago, leave it to the painter.

A young poet seeks a philosophy but finds an aesthetic if he is lucky. It is a critic's job to insist on the difference.

From *A Poet's Journal VIII*:

What a poet is really after, indeed, is that extra dimension, the God; and the trouble is that the lyric genius and the mechanical so seldom come together.

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