

## NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

### Robert Stein

#### To My Students: First Lecture

Take five hand-thick strips of wood  
you will collect tomorrow morning from the forest.  
(If you walk there quickly, you will not notice the wind).

Hold your palm up to block out the sun.  
Stand on a fallen log till you stare from where the palm was  
and are the sun.

Now all light is no longer in the sky,  
count and remember a row of houses, for example on the Alleenstraße.  
Count the blue roofs and the duck-egg blue roofs, separately,  
then the royal blue, the blackened ones.

Tell me, quietly, you have understood.

When you are asleep tonight,  
try to dream of fruit: orbbed fruit, lustrous like the sun,  
razor-edged and smiling like the moon.  
Remember: your bedside glass of water has a horizon.

Bind the strips with twine.  
Paint so thickly each wood strip so it forgets it is wood  
and how you found it.  
Score through the paint with a nail, the sharpened end of a brush,  
or something unexpected and unpleasant.

You can look at what I'm doing, but only the memory of it should be  
important.

Leave it for one night further.  
Chase and chip away as if you were holding a flint  
or as if from dreams a flare, a white flare sparked and fell there.

Go back to your own creation and see: lines and circles becoming a  
language

you would like to speak but hardly recognise.  
Work late at night when sleep is lacking. Imagine the sounds of this  
language.  
Do not talk to anyone except to the what you've made.  
Love and work it so lines come forth as if  
they are a new-made constellation.  
  
Hide and hone yourself amid the bulls and scorpions.

# Hilary Davies

## *Exile and the Kingdom: Poetry and Pilgrimage*

*Exile and the Kingdom*, my fourth and latest volume of poetry, treats of preoccupations that have been with me all my life. The collection consists of five distinct but interrelated sequences which all have to do with pilgrimage in some way. Our pilgrimage through life is in a very real sense an exile but how we approach it, are changed by it and by those we meet and love is also how we may approach the kingdom.

I have written in all my collections in sequences, with the exception of my first book of poems, *The Shanghai Owner of the Bonsai Shop*, back in 1991. This is because I found that discrete lyrics, unconnected to any wider context, were no longer sufficient by themselves to allow me to address the themes I wanted to address. I began to think in terms of a broader architectonic for the poems I wanted to write: each time I have embarked on new subject matter, I have sought a scaffolding, a framework, to give my work the reach I felt my chosen topic needed. Sometimes these have been quite simple, sometimes very complex, requiring a great deal of research in a dizzying variety of areas. This research has been an integral part of the poetic voyage and creative process for me over the years, and I find it exciting and exhilarating. *Exile and the Kingdom* is no exception.

The eponymous section comes last. It was, however, actually the first to be written. Finding this particular theme took a long time, over a year; the title, much longer. There were several false starts and considerable frustration. This was in part the normal consequence of having just published my third collection, *Imperium*. At such moments, there is always a period, first, of satisfaction and repletion, then an insidious feeling of lack of purpose, then increasing anxiety that you may never be able to do it again. This builds into a metaphysical sense of angst that can become unbearable and make one pretty strange to live with.

I knew I wanted to write something about the stages in my spiritual life up till then, including my conversion to Catholicism, but couldn't see how to do it. Slowly, I discovered a structure: the liturgical hours or divine office. These are amongst the very oldest of Christian prayers, dating back to the time of the apostles and influenced by Jewish practice. They were incorporated, in altered form, into Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* and are consequently familiar to Anglicans the world over, in, for example, evensong; they are still observed in monastic communities and in both the Eastern and Catholic churches. What was especially interesting to me was their symbolism, which

is a dual one. They mark out the day and the night, and are thus associated with different states of the soul, different spiritual aspirations, different signposts on the journey of life. Traditionally, they have also been attached to different texts in the New Testament, something of which I was not aware initially and which became part of the quest, to see how these passages related to events in my own life. They did, of course, as all great religious texts do, because part of their aim is to explain ourselves and the forces that we encounter to us. Let's take an example, the poem, 'Vespers'.

The office of Vespers is sung at dusk and signifies a time of reflection on the past day and on what is to come, in this case, the oncoming night. Its most famous section is the Magnificat, the verses in Luke's gospels in which Mary sings her acceptance of what is to happen to her despite the utterly terrifying implications of it. It is hope in the face of the unknown. The poem was written fast, over a couple of days. The opening lines 'Hosanna's the hardest, not the easiest thing: /It makes the sweat to drop in an old man's beard/ So much does he know of darkness and death's road' are a counter to the superficial but widespread view that faith is clung to because it makes life somehow 'easier' for the believer. On the contrary, faith makes it more difficult. It is rejection of hope that is easy when life's tests come upon us. As the first poem in the whole sequence says, 'so begins the first understanding:/That the impossibility of loving begets despair, / And despair kills'.

The latter, closely rhymed second part of 'Vespers' is a good example of how real and symbolic events coincide and are doubly illuminated by having an underlying structure that is not personal. The poem was written just after my husband had given away his second daughter at her wedding in Salle church, Norfolk. As the two of them arrived at the door of the church, everyone turned to look, as we all do at weddings. At that moment, a gust of wind lifted her veil high above her head and she had to struggle rather with it. But it floated like a luminous halo over her. And suddenly this image came powerfully back to me, acting at that subconscious level from which all real poetry comes. Without my forcing it, she had become a symbol of hope towards a future that cannot be foreseen, which brings joy but will also inevitably contain tragedy, yet which is somehow lifted up into something beyond itself, 'The guests are gathered in the church at Salle/ The light falls on the floor:/ For all eternity the rose/ Stands at heaven's door.'

'Across Country', the first section of the book, is a kind of diptych to 'Exile and the Kingdom'. It fleshes out the spiritual journey with other autobiographical incidents; the speaking 'I' is more present. Clearly there were still things I wished to say about spiritual voyages: 'Across Country' is the original meaning of the Roman 'per ager', of which the word

pilgrimage is a corruption. It came out of a plan to use a visit to Santiago de Compostela as a necklace on which to hang this exploration, and there is a direct reference to this ancient pilgrimage in the poem that closes this sequence. The cry ‘Ultreia’, roughly translatable as ‘ever onwards!’, is what walkers on the way have been saying to each other for a thousand years. I have crisscrossed the camino many times, and found this injunction written in the visitor’s book of the church in Limogne in Quercy, not long after I had seen modern pilgrims trudging past with their characteristic staff and hat. (The long and slow journey that has to be taken to Compostela is a reminder that to be converted *to* something implies also a conversion *away from*. I evoke this in the poem ‘Crossroads are sudden and everywhere’, which charts a severe falling out of love with existentialism while I was a student, a disillusionment born straightforwardly of reading what was in the original texts themselves. ‘Very sweet are the seductions of the lamplit room/ Whose geometries, unchecked, autarkic./ Unhouse humanity; and luscious the meretricious fruit/ of the ideology tree’.)

So no journey can happen without place, in every sense of the word. Places moved through, towards and away from, places lived in, psychological and physical. My home for the last twenty-five years has been the Lea valley, on the eastern edge of London. It is of huge importance to the history of the city, and yet remains unknown to many inhabitants in spite of being chosen for the site of the Olympic park in 2012. In order to celebrate it, I began writing occasional lyrics over a period of years, evoking the river, marshlands, the city, those who have lived here and given it its character way back even into the Stone Age. It is a hugely cosmopolitan place – more languages are spoken in my constituency than anywhere else in Europe – and that spirit of let and let live, the melting pot of cultures and the vibrant atmosphere it creates, is what I wanted to convey in ‘In Abney Park’. This is a 19<sup>th</sup> century cemetery in Stoke Newington, now a nature reserve beloved of walkers and mothers with babies. It is peopled with mourning angels, as was the custom of the time, but lies only yards from the bustle of Ermine Street, the great Roman road north to York, along which the trade and armies of empire have been travelling for two millennia.

The angels are praying in Abney Park.

Up and down Church Street hammers the city  
Buses and lorries, the motorbike’s scream,  
Fire-engines, sirens, car radios, convertibles,  
Strutting and wailing their terrors and dreams...

Here we lie: under the green and urban nettle  
Where a brook flew by  
And the sun and snow have settled  
Season by season we listen to the world's great cry

The angels are praying in Abney Park

This theme of interconnectedness, of the richness that the admixture of peoples brings, was the major inspiration behind the fourth section of the collection, 'Rhine Fugue'. This was an ambitious project which required a great deal of research over five years. Alongside my career as a poet, I was a teacher of French and German for nearly thirty years. These two countries are part of my psyche and part of my heritage as a European. They have also, as we notoriously know, been for many centuries alternately brothers and enemies, and the great watercourse that both unites and divides them is the Rhine. I first saw this river when I was on a school exchange, aged seventeen, and I have been returning regularly ever since. The notion of fugue was suggested to me by the fact that Beethoven was born on the banks of the river in Bonn; the contrapuntal nature of this musical form exactly fits the interweaving, recapitulations and reversals of the history of the Rhine. I wrote the poem in seven overlapping and yet distinctive sections, drawing on my own experiences with the kindness of strangers as a teenager; the Prussian general Blücher's crossing of the Rhine in the cold dead of night to go and help Wellington at Waterloo; evocations of the benign influence of the river in different French and German locations; the rich Jewish Ashkenazim tradition during the Middle Ages in Worms; William Tyndale's publication of his world-changing English translation of the New Testament while in exile, also in Worms; Beethoven as an exemplar of man's attempts to reach the spiritual world through music (this poem highly structured in a fugue-like rhyme pattern); and, finally, a return to a birthday party on the Rhine where ancient hatreds may be redeemed by cross-cultural, cross-linguistic and cross border friendships. When I began this poem, it seemed like a rather private concern of mine that might have little resonance with my readership; as we enter 2017, it has all the urgency of a warning against a not so benign return to the nationalisms and wars of the past,

... the tribal whirlpools  
And the arsenals, boiling;  
Gold greed and the swirl of insult,  
A twisted message arrowed from the balconies,  
Silos sliding,

Two by two,  
Four by four,  
Nation by nation,  
Ghost by ghost,  
Into the dragon's hillside.

O the melancholy of broken-backed bridges!  
For razed cities never gave garlands.

In the summer of 2013, my husband, the poet and editor Sebastian Barker, was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer and given three months to live. In fact, he lived another seven; he also lived to see his last and best collection, *The Land of Gold*, reach publication. It contains his farewell to life, to love, his family, to the landscapes he loved in France and Greece. It contains his last and most profound statement about hope and faith, from which he gave a reading in Cambridge two days before he died. This journey is one he had begun many years earlier but one on which I had gone with him, in marriage, poetically and spiritually. His death provoked profound grief and a sudden and violent realignment of everything in my life that had seemed so certain. I have described it as 'severe growth': growth that was not sought for nor wanted, but which came upon me just the same. I am still discovering what this means. The central sequence of the book is about the loss, confusion, terror and celebration that the death of one we love occasions. 'Lympne Hill' is a memory of looking out over the huge panorama at Lympne on the south coast towards Romney Marsh and the sea, where my husband seemed to touch, just for a moment, heaven. It is my thanksgiving to him.

You turn towards me, burning and happy,  
That boy running the clouds over and over  
Pell-mell into the hollows, this man  
In his years reaching with all his might  
Far out on life's cantilever to touch his soul's blue.

# Clare Best

## Something about the importance of poetry

At times of intense pain, I tend to retreat into silence, trying to find the still space inside myself, wanting to feel what I must feel first of all in my body. Only later, when the feelings come to my mind, do I find that words arrive – the words of poems I love, usually, because these are the most memorable.

Yesterday morning I lay in bed for an hour after hearing the Brexit news. Then I thought of W B Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming':

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity ...

And then I thought of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach':

The sea is calm tonight.  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!  
Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow



Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

When I had recited to myself the sections of these poems that I could recall, and then when I had looked up the full texts, I no longer felt alone, no longer quite as frightened.

A bit later, Robert Frost's poem 'The Road Not Taken' came to me – I have it completely by heart and it has brought me comfort in many different situations.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Poetry has been central to my life since I was given my first anthology of poems at the age of six. My spiritual journey so far has been long and complicated. But perhaps the most important stage of it has been discovering that, in the end, I find more spiritual succour in poetry than I do in organized religion.

When I was a regular church-goer (I am a lapsed Roman Catholic convert), it was the poetic language – in hymns, psalms and other texts – that harnessed and focused my spirituality. But about fifteen years ago, caught up in a lengthy storm of loss, I found myself in tears every time I went to church and whenever I sang or spoke or heard the wonderful words I loved. After a while I decided to stay at home and read in private. No embarrassment and no exposure, but just as much comfort and insight, and a similar but different form of connection and community. I had become a fully signed up member of the broad church of poetry.

Here are some of the reasons I think poetry is important, why it makes a difference:

- Poetry engages the reader with the intricacies of the most skilled use of language – the kind that chases and refines thought.
- When we read poetry we commune with all those other poetry readers – past, present and future.
- Poetry is a place where silence is truly as important as sound.
- Poetry – in its dynamic, contemplative, lyrical, dramatic, narrative and many other forms – offers so many opportunities to feel, be, meditate. For me, standing in this welcoming but rigorous space is the same as praying.
- In the music and metaphor of poetry, we find release, comfort. We feel refreshed and renewed. We feel better.

In my case, joining the church of poetry also meant taking on a continuing apprenticeship and trying to write it – I was setting out as a poetry pilgrim and hitching my small wagon to the long, winding caravan.

I write in order to become a better reader. And I read partly in order to become a better writer. It's two-way traffic. Reading and writing are of course both part of one activity.

My relationship with writing poetry is very much like my relationship with reading it. I have to feel things first in my body, relate to the feelings later with my mind, and then try to enter the language. Reading and writing poetry – both have helped me to keep on keeping on through illness, bereavement, confusion – in love, in fear, in hope, in despair. It is in poetry that I find out what I feel, who I am, how to communicate. How to commune.

Some years ago, during an intense fortnight of running poetry reading and writing workshops in HMP Shepton Mallet – working with a room full of men who had committed the most serious of crimes – I was amazed to witness poems acting as ambassadors and interpreters, literally allowing the men to say and feel things they had not been able to articulate until that moment. It was astonishingly moving, for all of us, and confirmed my sense of the powerful work of re-connection that poetry can do.

Trying to make the decision whether or not to undergo risk-reducing double mastectomy in 2006, I read widely. It was poetry that helped most – Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, Raymond Carver, Seamus Heaney... the list goes on and on. Poems gave me sustenance and I could cope with reading a poem – even in moments of tension, anxiety, pain and exhaustion when I couldn't easily engage with fiction.

After my surgery I wrote of my own experiences, lifting up words and memories like offerings. I wrote not because it helped me – actually, it was really tough to write – but because I had to. However, just as in every other demanding situation of loss and dramatic change, writing did help in the end, often in ways I could never have envisaged.

I find that the process of sensing, feeling, uncovering, writing and honing a poem takes me to new levels of understanding the initial impulse. Each stage of crafting helps me to make sense of things. Every poem I attempt to write is both a departure and an arrival. A step along the way.

Sometimes I sit down to write with just a feeling, like an itch. The physical movement of writing, and then the pacing around the room or shifting in my chair between bursts of writing, these move the feeling, the itch, through my body until I sense what it might be. Then my mind joins in. Five times out of ten, words don't appear, or a poem fails to grow out of the words that do appear. But I have still felt the beginnings of the poem, in the strange itchy stillness. I have known something like prayer. I have dwelt in the

communal space and experienced its energy and power.  
To finish, here is 'Caution' by Raymond Carver:

Trying to write a poem while it was still dark out,  
he had the unmistakable feeling he was being watched.  
Laid down the pen and looked around. In a minute,  
he got up and moved through the rooms of his house.  
He checked the closets. Nothing, of course.  
Still, he wasn't taking any chances.  
He turned off the lamps and sat in the dark.  
Smoking his pipe until the feeling had passed  
and it grew light out. He looked down  
at the white paper before him. Then got up  
and made the rounds of his house once more.  
The sound of his breathing accompanying him.  
Otherwise nothing. Obviously.  
Nothing.