

THE ORIGINS OF POEMS

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Inspiration

So many modern poets, when interviewed in literary magazines or writing in prose about their own work, admit to an intention or a plan in writing poems about certain themes, it is fair to assume that many 'poets' write poems as a deliberate exercise – as a painter chooses a theme and paints it. And poetry competitions bring in hundreds of so-called poems written to specifications – e.g. 'a poem not more than 40 lines long on the subject of Manchester.' Many poets are not reluctant to see poetry as an art which can be studied and learned. Universities and colleges offer creative writing classes and workshops in which poems are concocted. 'People can't put on an opera but they can write a poem' according to a 'future poet Laureate' Simon Armitage, in 1999 appointed 'Poet of the Millennium' and producing to order 'a bitter, excoriating work, lambasting celebrity culture, the tackiness of striving to conceive a millennium baby and Anglo-American foreign policy.' More recently (2006) he has written an 878 line poem on 9/11 ('That is my son dying' etc., although Armitage is not known to have been near New York on 9 / 11. He admits to writing the poem based on TV reporting). He has said in an interview, 'I always wanted to be a poet.' But this is a give away. If you are a poet you don't need to want to be one: you just hope you'll write poems – something out of your control. A poem is not as Armitage says 'built'. As the German poet Wilhelm Lehmann wrote (I translate): 'Poems must be worked on. But first they must *originate*.' Lehmann believed that when words and rhymes came together in a poem *things* were coming together in nature. 'Rhymes occur when things are allowed to meet up together, not word chimes.'

The current English poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy has remarked: 'The idea of great poetic genius is a thing of the past. We are more democratic now.' I do not like the idea of 'great poetic genius' either. Some of the most powerful poems have been anonymous ballads or one off occurrences in the lives of people who would never promote themselves as poets but have briefly lived the experience of being one. (One of the greatest poems in Irish, for example, is Eileen O'Leary's 18th century Lament for her husband Art. Another great 18th century poem in Irish English is the anonymous thieves' ballad, 'The Night Before Larry was Stretched.') But it is false democracy to insist that everybody is a poet. Poems are rare.

A 'real' (as distinct from fake) poem, or a 'durable' (as distinct from dud) poem is radically different from any deliberately concocted verse in two ways (at least): its very reality or durability, and its origin in what used to be called 'inspiration'. But poets who have written real and durable poems, when

they discuss their origin (sometimes they keep quiet about it) almost always make it clear that for them the experience of writing poems is in itself unusual, quite apart from the poem itself.

Of course anyone can claim to have been inspired. The children's writer, Enid Blyton, for instance gushed that all her stories 'wrote themselves', as did the trash novelist Barbara Cartland who could turn out a book every few weeks in just as long a time as it took to dictate it. But some poets have described their experience more succinctly.

A E Housman described how on long walks

As I went along, thinking of nothing in particular, only looking around me and following the progress of the seasons, there would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once, accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form part of. Then there would usually be a lull of an hour or so, then perhaps the spring would bubble up again.

Robert Graves described the

poetic trance, which happens no more predictably than a migraine or an epileptic fit... All poems, it seems, grow from a small verbal nucleus gradually assuming individual rhythm and verse form.

Robert Frost wrote that

For myself the originality need be no more than the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but it may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it.

Even the reticent Thomas Hardy described his poems as 'impelled.' The even more reticent (outside his poems) Sorley Maclean admitted that he had written several of the metrically very intricate (in Scottish Gaelic) poems of his cycle *Dáin do Eimhir* (Poems to Emer) in one go, having woken up in the middle of the night.

For myself, poetry comes from a voice in my head – not someone else's (I'm not psychotic), but my own voice which is out of my control.

In this chapter I shall use some of my own poems as examples in looking briefly at what poetry *is*, as a phenomenon. (What poetry has to say about time will be discussed later.)

Poem 1, The Dagd

One morning at the end of March 2000 I was finding it hard to get up, as at 7.00 it felt like 6.00 because of the change to summer time. I really had to force my eyelids open. I joked to my wife that I

felt like the 'Dagd', the Irish sun god with only one eye which was so big it had to be propped open. Then in the shower a poem came into my head:

An ancient giant, in a farm cart dragged
By labourers, his one remaining eye's huge lid
Propped open with a spear: the DAGD.

For the Greeks, Apollo's winged chariot scorched across the skies.
But the Irish cut the DAGD down to size.
Well, they would.

Why should a sun god have two eyes?

I scribbled this down when dressing and at breakfast remarked to my wife that I had written a poem in the shower about the Dagd and how the Irish had cut their sun god down to size. 'They would', she remarked. I found myself thinking that in ancient Ireland there was also a sun goddess (Áine), who had probably preceded the Dagd in the tradition, and that the 'two Is' of my wife and myself could at times be 'one I' in the affinity of our thoughts.

The poem is true to the myth. It is not even a very personal poem in that it did not express a current conflict for me. My feeling when writing it was one of pleasure and amusement. I suppose I was aware of the Irish 'knocking' tendency in myself. But the timing of the poem is of interest: it occurs just after the change to summer time with its implicit theme of the sun's progress across the sky, and it is followed by my wife's echo of its key phrase, 'they would', and my thought about 'two Is' and 'one I'.

The poem can even be seen as the key part of a series. But although it is in the middle of the series, it is 'the last word' about the events it describes. I can add all sorts of thoughts to it – about the function of sun gods, about my fatigue that spring, about the affinity of 'two Is', and so on. I do not need to add the poem. Anyone can read things in it from their own lives. But it is still the last word.

Poem 2, This and That

When I lived in Prince Edward Island and worked in a Mental Health Clinic I was seeing my last client of the morning and listening to her account of a long-standing conflict with her husband when my mind wandered briefly to having made love with my wife the night before. A poem pushed its way into my mind:

This needs that
But this this,
This that – more
Than this or
That – must be
You and me,

This in that
Come to this –
O that this!

But for what
Does that that
That is you
Need this this?
That round this
Come to that –
O this that!

Those were the words, as they came. But as often happens, they came with a rush of other images. In fact the poem turns out to contain no explicit imagery at all: *this* and *that* stand for all sorts of things which simultaneously flooded my mind. Meanwhile I was half listening to the client droning on and I was faced with the problem of retaining the words in my mind. (I forget verse easily, whether my own or other people's.) I kept repeating them in my mind like a spell as I went through the motions of discussing the client's dilemma for another ten minutes or so, then showed her to the door and ran to my desk to write out the poem. On reflection I think my state of consciousness throughout was 'trance consciousness', and in my interaction with the client I was 'on automatic', as when driving a car and talking intensely to a companion. With the client, I am afraid to say, my discussion was strictly speaking unconscious. (I certainly could not remember a word of it afterwards.)

If there was a trigger to the poem I suppose it was the contrast between the misery of the client's account of distance from her husband and my sense of closeness, that morning at least, to my wife. There was *that* (last night) and *this* (now). There was most explicitly the *this* and *that* of the penis and vagina – or the *that* and *this* as they became in a sense interchangeable. The poem is about *sex* in the sense of the 'cut' (the original meaning of the word, which is connected with *scissors*) between the two sexes – *that* and *this*. *This* and *that* (and vice versa) are also the other differences between my wife and me, including our conflicts as a man and woman living together (like the conflicts of my client). The poem celebrates *vive la difference* between the sexes, but feels the difference in a sort of horror too. As so often when writing a poem my emotion was simultaneously a deep horror (a sort of dread) and delight. Complicated!

I was so struck by how the bare bones of this poem, the *this* and *that*, carried so many meanings, that as an exercise I wrote out the whole meaning of the poem in prose. It took three pages, and of course as prose is rather tedious. The most difficult thing to explain about the experience of writing a poem is the density of the imagery, feeling, and thought that all rush into consciousness at once as it occurs (whether it is being written out or sounded in the head when no pen and paper are to hand). It has appeared out of nowhere – as of from the *unconscious*. Yet it does not feel as if it has all been thought through in the unconscious and prepared for writing out.

I suppose a theory of inspiration might be just that: unconscious processes work away and produce a poem (just as they can solve problems as we sleep) which then, when it is complete, rises to the surface. Some people say it feels as if a poem is ‘dictated’ to them. Yet, as Graves has said in discussing this idea, there is no doubt the voice is one’s own, and the poem ‘about’ one’s own experience. As Graves puts it, the poem has many ‘layers of meaning’ but these are all experienced at once during the writing. The poem is not planned, it is a revelation. Or as Graves puts it, ‘a miraculous event in non-history.’ It feels in that sense timeless – or at least out of time. It seems to include past, present and future. In the case of *This* and *That* it includes many images from the past – but this is true of any writing. We have only experienced the past and what we call the present is in fact an awareness of what has just happened – in that succession of ‘nows’ (literally a fraction of a second long) we are aware of. The sexual imagery of *This* and *That* is from last night, and the conflict imagery from a minute or so before in the client’s account. The present in the poem is an intense experience of many layers of the past. But there also seems to be a future – in the feeling of mixed dread and excitement which accompanied the poem, as so many. A sort of cry from the heart: Is *this* what life is like? Is this what the future holds? Is this – *this and that* – all that we are? Are we personal or impersonal, are we Seán and Ghislaine (just names anyway), or are we just a man and a woman, or just *this* and *that*? If so, how awful! Or how wonderful!

So, again, the poem has the last word. It says more in a very short space than can be said about it in a very long space in prose. And it has a very odd relationship with what we call time. For one thing, in the poem *everything is happening at once* – or at least huge spaces of meaning are condensed into a small space. The parts and the whole are simultaneously visible. Huge areas of time are condensed into a shorter area. A poem may therefore seem timeless, or to change time. So that Shakespeare, for example, writes sonnets about how they defy and defeat time – along with other sonnets that give in despairingly to time – and others (the best perhaps) that both win and lose, at once, against time. Here we are back to the paradoxes of poetry we see in Parmenides.

The greatest paradox may be that while a poem may feel as if it is changing time or transcending it, it is in itself bound by the rhythms of time. *This* and *That* has an unusual form, with lines of three syllables and three stresses – RAT-TAT-TAT, RAT-TAT-TAT – but it cannot escape its own rhythm. It pulses – though not in the usual way.

Poem 3, Mumm’s Champagne

When you cracked open the Mumm’s champagne
To celebrate our first whole night –
In the new sheets you had bought, striped blue and white –
You didn’t know how much pain
Would follow from being together.

But our love has not turned vinegar,

Though it's no longer bubbly – a blood red wine
Pressed from the last grapes of two ageing vines
Whose limbs would have to be snapped
To get them apart.

We have grown around each other, and here
Are the same sheets, the stripes faded and worn,
And a bottle of something more modest than Mumm's.
The champagne spurts
And though we forget nothing, nothing hurts.

This is, I hope straightforward enough to tell its own story and need no explanation. But it originated in a loose series of coincidences. First, we had had guests and my wife was short of sheets so she dug out some old ones we had not used for some years – sheets we had first used many years before. We made the bed together, joking about the sheets. We were spending the evening together for the first time in a while without family or other company. I had bought a bottle of champagne – of a sort (Cava, really). After years of bringing up children we could no longer afford Mums. We had been talking a lot, and rather painfully, about how she had given up her work to be a full time mother (a 'Mum' of course) for some years then had to retrain in a new profession. That week I had been ordering some crates of wine via the Internet and had received a lot of publicity about 'old vines.' When I wrote the poem the following day, it took its place among the events it describes. Perhaps it made amends for some of the pain: our relationship started in very difficult circumstances and the striped sheets were emblematic of it – alternating light and dark like our first days together, and much of our life together. (And my wife is very dark, while I am fair). The beginning of the poem also revealed something of the 'fate' of our coming together: the fact that the champagne she had bought was Mums had no significance of 'mother' or mothering at the time: she was French-speaking and we spoke French. I had paid no attention to the brand name beyond its being a good one. But now it was a prophecy. The poem's last line also resolved a dilemma between us: it was possible not to forget painful things but nevertheless to be no longer pained by them. And of course the poem is about sex too.

There is nothing magic here, but again the poem is a sort of 'last word' on a situation – or the last event in a very long cluster of events.

Poem 4, Canadian War Memorial, Green Park

I think of Bertram Warr,
A leaf fallen from a plane
In the year I was born –
Another poet gone –
And Isaac Rosenberg.

If they were to meet
(Wherever they might be)
They might talk of Stepney:
Life in a slum,
A rat in a bombed house carrying a crumb.

Poems to be published should explain themselves and I am not sure this one does, as not every one will have heard of Warr and Rosenberg. But it illustrates a more simple sort of occurrence of a poem than This and That.

I went on my own on Remembrance Day 2000 to the Canadian War Memorial, in Green Park, London, at 11.00 a.m., and stood for a while thinking of my father who served in the war (and who lived some years in Canada as a young man) and of poets who died in the world wars. Warr was a Canadian who wrote a few lovely poems and was shot down over Germany when on a bombing mission in the RAF, in 1943, the year of my birth, when he was in his mid-twenties. Rosenberg, much better known as a poet and painter, was a London East End Jew who was killed, also in his mid-twenties, in the trenches in 1917. I was thinking about their common fate and the complete lack of connection between them. I was staring at the hundreds of bronze maple leaves under the trickling water of the memorial and the hundreds of real maple-like golden leaves strewn across the nearby grass, fallen from the plane trees in Green Park. On a wave of sadness the first three lines of the poem floated into my mind, with an awareness of the double meaning of 'plane'. Then as my mind moved to Rosenberg I suddenly realised there was a connection: Warr had written a poem about exploring a bombed out house in Stepney, where Rosenberg had grown up. The image of the rat carrying a crumb is from Warr's poem.

The poem formed itself out of these sudden connections. In a way the poem is just an intense form of thought in rhythm and rhyme. It contains no new happenings. I suppose I felt, for the moment, as if I was somehow connecting Warr and Rosenberg. But the poem makes several connections. There is obviously a difference between a poem and a 'series'. But they have in common the making of connections among things which are not otherwise connected. Again, thought also does this. But in writing a poem one feels part of the thought process and somehow not responsible for it all.

Take a list of the 'ingredients' in this poem:

- The Canadian War Memorial
- Green Park
- Bertram Warr
- 1943
- Isaac Rosenberg
- plane trees and fallen leaves
- bronze maple leaves
- a bombed out slum

Stepney
A rat carrying a crumb
Myself.

I suppose it would be possible to concoct a poem from these ingredients, and the connections between the two 'war poets' and the war memorial are immediate enough. No doubt I am making these connections, from what I know. But writing the poem was involuntary and it felt as if Warr were somehow contributing to it with his poem about the rat.

Actually, there are more connections than I was aware of as the poem came to mind. I have only just recalled when writing this that one of Rosenberg's best known poems, *Daybreak in the Trenches*, is about observing, and identifying with, a rat. And for all I know the bombed house Warr explored was the former house of the Rosenbergs – flattened as it was by bombing long after they left it.

Even a simple poem like this has more connections than I could have consciously thought up – and may have more I have not thought of yet. As I think of new connections, they are like buried layers in the poem. For example, now I have remembered *Daybreak in the Trenches* and its 'insolent' rat looking at Rosenberg, this will be part of any re-reading of my own poem. I even find myself wondering if Warr – who could have read Rosenberg's poems – was looking for Rosenberg's house in Stepney and thinking of Rosenberg's rat. There are also connections or resonances from the names of the two poets. 'Warr' is obvious. But Rosenberg evokes 'rose' and the most popular sentimental song in 1916 and 1917 was Frederick Weatherby's *Roses of Picardy*. Rosenberg was killed in Picardy.

Poetry and the brain

I should add that as a neuropsychologist I haven't a clue about the origins of poetry in the brain (if they are in the brain, which I sometimes doubt). No convincing experiments on inspiration could be done, I think, because it is a rare and unpredictable phenomenon. There are all sorts of psychological essays and books about 'creativity' but the net is cast too wide so as to include hundreds of so-called 'artists'. A poem is not planned. (If it is, then it is not a poem but a damp squib – like the 'occasional' verses of the current poet laureate Andrew Motion which are a cause merely for parody and laughter). But it may be highly organised even in its first draft. My guess is that in inspiration, when everything happens at once, all areas of the brain – including the emotional systems, intellectual processing systems, executive control systems, and memory systems – are simultaneously aroused. This arousal is by definition autonomic.

The classicist Housman, who had no pretensions to science, described meticulously the autonomic reactions he felt when writing (or even reading or thinking of) a poem: his whiskers bristling, hair standing slightly on end, cold chivers going down the spine, a feeling in the stomach that he describes by quoting Keats's remark that the memory of his girlfriend Fanny Brawne 'goes through me like a spear.'

The neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, who has identified seven emotional operating systems of the brain (SEEKING, ANGER, FEAR, PANIC, LUST, CARE and PLAY) has speculated about the biological origins of the ‘chills’ and ‘thrills’ sometimes felt when a person is moved by music. His description echoes Housman’s (which he did not know at the time of writing but found accurate when they were shown to him):

‘We even love to hear sad songs – especially bittersweet songs of unrequited love and loss. A common physical experience that people report when listening to such moving music, especially melancholy songs of lost love and longing, as well as patriotic pride from music that commemorates lost warriors, is a shiver up and down the spine, which often spreads down to the arms and legs, and indeed, all over the body.... An intriguing possibility is that a major component of the poignant feelings that accompany sad music are sounds that may acoustically resemble separation DVs [distress vocalisations] – the primal cry of being lost or in despair.’

Possibly systems involving opioids or thermoregulatory systems are involved. ‘Thus when we hear the sound of someone who is lost, especially if it is our child, we also feel cold. This may be nature’s way of promoting reunion. In other words, the experience of separation establishes an internal feeling of thermoregulatory discomfort that can be alleviated by the warmth of reunion.’

Panksepp concludes that ‘The study of music will have profound consequences for understanding the psychology and neurobiology of human emotions.’

Panksepp’s own work is already revolutionising neuroscience with its emphasis on emotion, and he is collaborating on studies of whether birdsong is changed by playing music to the birds. But as Wyndham Lewis wrote in *Time and Western Man*: ‘In music the sounds *say* nothing.’ Poetry is so dense with meaning compared with music that it may be the closest approach to a description of reality available to us. I have always resisted the (possibly profitable) idea of writing about the psychology of poetry, because poetry is so much deeper and denser in meaning than psychology. To write about the psychology of poetry would be like writing about planet earth solely in terms of cartography.

The pre-existence of poems

A poem feels like the final word. But it also seems to pre-exist. When writing, it feels as if the poem is already there. There is a sense of excitement at revealing it, and often (for me) a sense of horror – ‘Oh No!’ But one does not always grasp it clearly in the first draft. So one works to ‘get it right’ (a phrase Robert Graves used). This getting it right may require patience in the area of finding the right word: usually the right words are there from the beginning, but where a word feels wrong it seldom works to go to a dictionary or thesaurus. If one waits, the word will eventually turn up. It is like what happens when one cannot remember something. I often tell Memory Clinic patients not to *try* to remember a word ‘on the tip of the tongue’ (known as the ‘TOT’ phenomenon). If they wait, it will float to the surface sooner

or later (unless they have Alzheimer's disease). In the case of a poem, this feels like the last word to the last word. But other things to 'get right' are rhythm, sound variations, and sometimes rhymes. Although again, a rhyming dictionary does not help and feels somehow wrong. The poem must, on all its levels, be left to complete itself as it will usually do spontaneously if the poet comes back to it a few times and re-reads it attentively. The poem has a life of its own. Sculptors apparently sometimes feel that they are chipping away at the block of material to find the sculpture which is already in there.

Although a poem consists of words, it is not just a flow of words and sound. The words have exact *meaning*. And the poem has a *form* like a sculpture. It looks like a poem on the page, and its sounds and rhythms have form. In fact the most common poetic metre in English, the five stress line – as in 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' – has a form that matches the biological rhythms of heartbeat and breathing. The five 'beats' to a line correspond roughly to usual ratio of five heartbeats to a breath. The line is roughly the same length as a breath – and it often has a rise two beats in (Shall I *compare* thee to a summer's day?) that corresponds to the pulsatory shift from shorter inbreath to longer outbreath. In the poem its shape (the lines on the page) and its sound correspond.

A well known poetic form in most European languages is the sonnet. It has fourteen lines (which makes its length correspond roughly with a minute) and one or other complex rhyme scheme. Some poets have reported the experience of writing a poem straight out and arriving at the the last couple of lines or the end before realising it is a sonnet, complex rhyme scheme and all. (This has happened to me once or twice, e.g. in *Persistence*, quoted later). No doubt the Elizabethan sonneteers who churned out hundreds of them could write them in their sleep, and obviously the knowledge of these poetic forms is stored in the brains of those who read them. But it still feels uncanny to write in a form before knowing it is that form. Again the poem pre-exists.

Of course much modern poetry rejects form and is in 'free verse', but as Robert Frost said this is like playing tennis without a net. Most free verse is dead on the page. Being entirely rooted in normal speech it is a left hemisphere language phenomenon, with no input from the 'musical' right hemisphere. It is not poetry in the sense this has been understood for millennia. It is merely prose pretending to be poetry. As the American poet Trumbull Stickney said, poetry is musical thought.

Free verse satisfied a rebellious prejudice against form – not unnatural after centuries in which hack versifiers killed form by regularising it too much, as in the 18th century 'heroic couplet' in which identical rhythms succeed each other, much like plastic imitations of a sculpture coming out of an assembly line. It also coincided with what Wyndham Lewis called the 20th century 'time cult' in which under the influence of Bergsonian and Jamesian philosophy, life was seen as a flow of unconnected sensations, without form or meaning. Even the painting of the period reflects this – from Impressionism, though Expressionism, to Abstract painting. (When I go to the Quai d'Orsay gallery in Paris I don't go up to the top floor where the Monets are, I stay downstairs with the Manets and Courbets. I like *line*, in painting

as in poetry. And this is part of my character – my personal meaning and form. Although the poem once written is ‘out there’ as if it has pre-existed and demanded to be written, I cannot deny it has come from my own experience.)

Poem 5, Black Hill

Along the moorside, scattering sheep,
Clambering over walls of black stone,
Under the lark’s twitter in the sky sphere
And the hobby hawk’s begging wheep,
I’ve climbed. I’d thought I was alone.
But *they* were there. They *are* here
On the ridge in a round barrow
Tussocked with grass, crumbling down,
Boulders tumbled into its crown.

I lie on the grass and press my ear
Against a boulder. Dimly I hear:

*Who I am you don’t want to know.
How it is you don’t want to know.*

Dimly I see blue eyes scrunched narrow,
White cheeks and forehead, yellow hair.

*You don’t want to know who I am.
I was killed with me Dad and me Mam.
Death is more than you want to know.
What it’s like you don’t want to know.*

Yellow-haired girl, you don’t want to know
How all is changed, nothing is changed.
I lie despairing on this slope.
In this world I find no hope.
Here I am with the whiffling air,
And wheeping hawks, and larks so high
I can’t tell where they are in the sky.
No flowers for a grave, the moor is bare.

*Draw me a circle on the stone
With your finger, a cross in the circle – so.
And put your lips to the circle – so.
This is my forehead, kiss my forehead
So I can feel that I’m not dead.*

I’ve kissed the cross in the circle – so.
Along the moorside, scattering sheep,
I descend to the hazy valley below.

Three hares start from my track as I go.

Yellow-haired girl asleep in the ground,
Under the grass and stone of your mound –
I don't want to know. You don't want to know.

In 1998 I gave several organisational psychology 'workshops' with colleagues at the Moorside Hotel in Derbyshire, for managers and executives of a large industrial firm. The workshops were routine although the company was good. I had never been in Derbyshire but had some interest in it because the landscape looked like Ireland in some ways and my maternal grandfather, who was born in Yorkshire, had the surname Riley (no connection to the Irish Reilly: it means 'rye-lea', a rye clearing) and this is most common in Derbyshire. So I imagined some kinship with the place. In May the days were getting long and although on one day it snowed there was usually warm sunshine so some of us would go for walks in the early evening, before a late dinner. We usually walked across the road and up a winding road to the West. From this the hill which loomed above the hotel to the East was more visible, crossed by stone walls and dotted with sheep, and I suppose about 500 feet high from the road. One evening I decided to climb it on my own, clambering over the drystone walls and slogging up to the top, a long ridge with another valley down to the East. At the higher end of the ridge were several collapsed Bronze Age or Iron Age tumuli, just as so often in Ireland on hill tops. I had the thought '*They are here*', and after that I walked around in a sort of trance with lines of the poem forming in my head. As I did what I did the lines formed. As I descended the hill afterwards with the sun setting behind me the poem completed itself in my head and I wrote it down before dinner.

After writing the poem I was curious about the name of the hill but no-one in the hotel (where few if any of the employees were local) knew it. When I got home I looked it up on a map. Black Hill. So that gave me a name for the poem, and very appropriate too, given my mood. I was next up at Moorside in June and I climbed the hill again one evening, this time in a spirit of curiosity. I stood studying the chaotic heap of boulders where I had lain down and listened through the stone. I noticed some shreds of paper and went to pick them up. They were fragments of a torn up letter and seemed to have been stuffed under one of the stones. At first I thought someone had used them to wipe themselves, but the stains on them were from bird droppings. The handwriting was in black ballpoint and in a childish hand, smudged as the paper had obviously been wet by rains. It had obviously been a love letter: there were words about disappointment and love and being let down. And on one of the fragments I could discern clearly the word *Sean* (without the accent – i.e. not Seán). I could not tell if the letter was written to Sean or from Sean. It is not a common name in Derbyshire but it exists there as everywhere since Sean Connery made the James Bond movies. I felt a shiver down my spine. Was it a letter from the girl with yellow hair?, I thought confusedly. I brought the letter home with me, thinking I would piece it together. But I never did. I don't read other people's letters. Perhaps it is best not to go too far into the origins of poems.

Where a poem comes from

A poet does not know how many poems he or she has ‘in him’ or ‘in her.’ As Martin Seymour-Smith has written, the worry about whether there are going to be any more poems is diagnostic of the true poet. (The fake poet, of which there are many, is impatient with this and simply concocts fake poems.) Although it is impossible to ascertain what happens in the brain during the writing of a poem, perhaps what Julian Jaynes calls the bicameral mind is at work, and the right hemisphere is speaking to the left. This theory of Jaynes’ was long thought to be merely eccentric but recent evidence from neuroscience ‘split brain’ experiments supports it. As Louis Cozolino puts it, the evidence suggests ‘another “will” residing in the right hemisphere.’ Most recently, Ekhnaton Goldberg, a former student of Luria, in *The Executive Brain* has spelled out a theory and findings that suggest a new definition of hemispheric function. The ‘visual’ right hemisphere is also (as is now well known) partly verbal but its role is to process new information and encode it in more general visual images and verbal schemes, before passing it on to the left hemisphere for more precise verbal encoding in the person’s history. (This echoes previous theories of the brain dealing with ‘fluid’ and ‘crystallised’ information.) Ekhnaton discusses Jaynes’s theory, long supposedly refuted by evidence that the ‘visual’ right hemisphere cannot ‘speak’ to the left, and rehabilitates it – in a neat example of how a Popperian ‘refutation’ falsifies a theory but new evidence from a new perspective suggests it is true.

Jaynes cites evidence from cuneiform and other inscriptions in the Eastern Mediterranean ‘cradle of civilisation’ in the second millennium BC that when the gods spoke to mortals it was always in verse – usually in a dactylic metre (- ^ / stress, unstress, unstress) the utterances of the oracles and sybils (usually un-trained countrywomen who opened themselves to the words of the god) in the first millennium BC were in the same metre. And amazingly, it also breaks out in the 20th century trance utterances of Afro-Brazilian ‘Umbanda’ mediums.

I do not completely rule out the possibility that the yellow haired girl under the mound on Black Hill actually spoke to me from the past. But in that case she would have somehow been an English speaker and therefore buried there in recent centuries. It is more likely that anyone buried under that mound would be a speaker of a Celtic or pre-Celtic language, in which case the voice I heard may have been a voice of my own but somehow speaking ‘for her’ or ‘as her’. (Which does not mean I ‘made her up’, or that she is an unconscious part of me. I felt her as an external presence.) But more usually for me the poem I write has a voice – my own – as if ‘I’ am speaking quietly and urgently to ‘me’. I hear the poem and obey it in writing it down. It takes me over. There is nothing else in mind. This reduction of all awareness to one source is typical of hypnotic and other trances. It is trance consciousness. It cannot be invoked at will. I only find myself writing a poem or fragment of one five to ten times a year or so if I am lucky. In theory a SPECT scan of my brain might reveal, during the writing of the poem, the ‘lighting up’ of my musical right

temporal lobe as my linguistic left temporal lobe lights up also – or in Goldberg’s scheme the passing of fluid information from the right to be crystallised in the left. Perhaps the lobes excite each other into ‘musical thought’ with a powerful autonomic / emotional impulse via the sub-cortex which mediates rhythm. But I cannot live my life under a SPECT scanner waiting for the miracle of a poem. (I’m sure Simon Armitage would oblige if he were asked to write a poem under a scanner, but it would not be a poem.)

The phenomenon of inspiration can be distinguished from possession, where the entranced oracle or prophet is taken over by a voice not his or her own, and does not remember afterwards what the voice has said. Another of Plato’s gifts to posterity was the idea that poets are mad when inspired, possessed, and ‘out of their senses.’ Jaynes quotes the Iliad to refute this slander: ‘Say to me, Muses... for you are goddesses and *and are present and know all.*’ We have seen how Parmenides in Peri Physeos listens to the voice of the un-named goddess for almost all the poem, after an initial ‘kindling’ description of the young man, himself, being rushed into her presence. Parmenides’ poem is a kind of dialogue, in that the goddess addresses him directly and anticipates his objections to her uttered truth. It is a highly complex poem, full of reflective consciousness, but it reads as if written in a trance and its intensity is such that it may have been written over one session – not impossible even if it was originally somewhat longer than than the 161 lines that survive. I have myself written a 100 line poem (Ingratitude to the General – admittedly hardly on Parmenides’ level) while ‘taking notes’ in a management meeting. And one of my more intense poems, Desire in Belfast, 106 lines long, forced itself on me in two chunks in the same morning, while I was driving, so that I had to pull onto the verge to write them down.

Personally, I am never more in my senses than when writing a poem. But a shift in cultural consciousness, at least, has taken place since Homer. In writing a poem I realise that the voice is not the Muse’s but my own – while nevertheless having a superstition or devout sense that the poem would not occur if the Muse was not present, in the form of the woman I have in mind when writing the poem. Most of my poems, even when not love poems, are written ‘to’ a woman. (The Elizabethans would have said ‘through’ a woman.) And for most women poets I think there is an equivalent presence of an addressed man.

At any rate the voice in my poems is me. So it makes sense to suppose that it is one part of my mind (or brain, or field of consciousness) speaking in verse to another.

As I have noted earlier, I personally lack what Jaynes calls the ‘analogue I’ – the images in mind of the self seen by the self. This is partly temperamental. As I suspect it is in Jaynes who is so sure of the omnipresence of the analogue I that I think he must have been something of a narcissist. But partly, in my case, it is a choice. I remember deciding, shortly after I had written my first poems, and under the influence of a girlfriend who was unusually spontaneous and naïve, that I would reject all narcissistic images – as if seeing myself in an internal mirror – and live only through my own feelings and eyes. Martin

Seymour-Smith described inspired poets as necessarily naïve, as distinct from self-consciously ‘sentimental’. (This distinction originates with the German 18th century poet Schiller). Probably naivete is necessary in a poet. Thomas Hardy for example was obviously naïve. But he was also cunning as a fox.

Wherever the voice of a poem is coming from, and even if it is describing events in time, it seems to come from ‘outside time’. This too works in brain terms. In my doctoral thesis I suggested, on the rudimentary evidence available in 1977, that the right hemisphere was faster than the left. Goldberg now confirms this.

The poem gathers together events, images and feelings from different times, into one. Its ‘last word’ is timeless. The poem comes from nowhere into somewhere. The ‘nowhere’ may be the generalising right hemisphere and the ‘somewhere’ the particularising left hemisphere. The left hemisphere quantifies time, makes it linear, measures it. The right hemisphere must be involved in spatialising it. Time cannot be said to be invented by one lobe or the other, it must be invented by both. I suspect that in a poem, as in a dream, the frontal lobes (on both sides) although they retain their organising function are somewhat de-activated in their inhibitory function. The frontal lobes are known to be the main areas of the brain involved in making time estimates and judgements: they are critical and inhibitory, and it is clear that if the poet is going to open his or her mind to the poem coming from nowhere, critical hesitation must be set aside. (It is reinstated when revising the poem and eliminating lines or words where inspiration has failed. As Laura Riding said: ‘criticism is death’.) The driving rhythm of the poem, presumably mediated by sub-cortical structures such as the basal ganglia, but deriving from the pulsation of the whole body, reminds us that timelessness and time coexist. We cannot escape time.

More-than-coincidence is a sudden sense of *meaning* in a recognized cluster of events. The meaning may be at first sight trivial – a link among bald-headed shop owners and fire, or among the vocable ‘iv’ in certain names – but it is recognised with emotion, as non-causal links often seem to be. We are freed from our usual cause-effect chains. More-than-coincidence transcends time.

Similarly a poem. It may turn out to have drawn words and images from widely scattered moments in time, but together (linked as in an a-causal event cluster) they now have meaning and they transcend time – even as the poem that embodies them is alive with the rhythms and counter-rhythms (pulsation and pulse-waves) which make us aware of time. Perhaps the poem moves us with a sense simultaneously of mortality and immortality, extinction and eternity, time and timelessness.