

Mind The Gap: On Reading American Poetry

JOHN BURNSIDE

Yet words are not the end of thought, they are where it begins.

– Jane Hirshfield

Not so long ago, a highly-esteemed British poet, someone I hugely admire, described, to a company of which I was part, how he couldn't read a poem by Jorie Graham without laughing out loud. What he wanted to say, he went on, was that her *oeuvre*, with the possible exception of a handful of earlier works, was risible, all smoke and mirrors, a pointless and self-indulgent exercise in experimental twaddle. To say I was taken aback is an understatement and, as a devoted reader of Graham's work, I took issue with this, looking to the rest of the company for support; the rest of the company was, however, peculiarly British and, though each was in his or her own way professionally engaged with poetry, all more or less casually agreed with the sentiments expressed. From there, the conversation moved on to the work of other American poets – by American, here, I mean: originating in the United States – and a consensus was soon reached that America was in a bad way, poetically speaking. The American poem was thin, overly-expansive, self-regarding, pseudo-intellectual and – most grievous of sins – sentimental (the mind boggles, trying to conceive of a sentimental poem by Jorie Graham, but then the work of this astonishingly rigorous artist probably fell into the pseudo-intellectual category). It was also far too bloody long. As a devoted reader of American poetry, and as one who values the contemporary American scene very highly indeed, I cast around for names to counter the general mood of dismissiveness. Charles Wright? A polite, but cool response. John Ashbery? Oh, God, no; he's worse than Graham, though at least he's funny on occasion. Robert Wrigley? Rodney Jones? Linda Gregerson? Eric Pankey? Jennifer Atkinson? Like so many other fine American poets, not really known here. And Brigit Pegeen Kelly? The table was silent. There was, at this point, very little I could say other than to offer that standard, utterly pointless, and – no matter how smug it may sound – far from satisfying riposte.

“You don't know what you're missing,” I said – but I didn't feel at all smug, or even ‘right’ in any meaningful sense. I believe that I am not

especially naïve about the gap between British and American sensibilities; and I have studied hard to acquire a necessarily subtle – and detached – appreciation of the traditions and social conditions that helped create that gap, yet I am bound to say that, as the conversation progressed, I felt an oddly personal sense of desolation in realising that these lovers of poetry, who would have taken immense pains to get to grips with contemporary writing from Venezuela, or the Ukraine, could so easily dismiss the one contemporary poetry that, for me, has always been vitally important, and from which I feel I have learned so much; not only about writing and reading, but also about thinking, and about being in the world.

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Begin by imagining the opening of a poem: a woman is walking her child to the school bus-stop, possibly somewhere in the Midwest. On the way, they see a dead deer, a doe, lying stiff and cold in the grass. This deer is related, spiritually and lyrically, to many others, living and dead – one could fill a decent-sized anthology with American deer poems – but it is also a singular variation on the traditional theme. In this poem, the deer is dead, but it is still strangely unapproachable, still set off at a distance. One thinks of the driver in the William Stafford poem, ‘Traveling Through the Dark’, who, finding a dead doe on the road, sees “a heap, a recent killing”, and, because “it is usually best to roll them into the canyon”, drags her off:

she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason –
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.

The driver is troubled by his predicament: the fawn is still alive, but the dead deer presents a danger to other drivers and, though he hesitates, his final allegiance is to his own species. So it is that, in closing, he tells us:

I thought hard for us all – my only swerving –
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

Here, in spite of the speaker’s compassion for both deer and fawn, the “heap” he has found on the road is approachable, readily handled, and the vital warmth of the unborn fawn can be felt through the side of the dead mother. Elsewhere, in a poem of Robert Frost’s, ‘Two Look at Two’, the

encounter is with live animals, and though a wall separates the two humans from the two deer, there is nevertheless a closeness, almost an intimacy in the meeting:

A doe from round a spruce stood looking at them
Across the wall, as near the wall as they.
She saw them in their field, they her in hers
[...]
they saw no fear there.

After a moment, the doe is joined by a buck, who seems to interrogate the human couple, daring them to speak, or to “stretch a proffered hand” – and, when the encounter is over, the poem ends with a quiet affirmation:

Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.

One could point to many other ‘deer encounter’ poems in the American pastoral tradition, but few add so much to that tradition, and work in such organised opposition to the easy conclusions it sometimes calls forth, as the poem I asked you to imagine above, Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s ‘Dead Doe’. Here, the woman and her child, waiting at the school bus stop, find the dead animal, but they do not – cannot – approach her, as Stafford’s driver, or Frost’s couple, so easily do:

The doe lay dead on her back in a field of asters: no.

The doe lay dead on her back beside the school bus stop: yes.

Where we waited.

Her belly white as a cut pear. Where we waited: no: off

from where we waited: yes

at a distance: making a distance
we kept.

To begin with, in fact, they cannot even approach her imaginatively: the speaker struggles to describe the scene, constantly tempted by, and refusing,

familiar scenarios. Indeed, this opening passage sets the scene for all that is to come: throughout, Kelly refuses the easy appeal of traditional pastoral, or the clear moral predicament Stafford evokes; when she is tempted into images like that “cut pear”, she draws back, and insists upon the unbridgeable distance between the dead animal and the human family group. What sets that distance between them is not distaste for a dead, perhaps decaying corpse – or even squeamishness about death itself – and the desire to avoid forced explanations of mortality, but the fear of witnessing some kind of resurrection:

As we kept her dead run in sight, that we might see if she chose
to go skyward:
that we might run, too, turn tail
if she came near
and troubled our fear with presence: with ghostly blossoming [...]

From this point onwards, the poem embarks upon a method which Kelly has made her own, a bringing forth of the process of working through a spiritual problem, a kind of extended meditation that is also a thought experiment, aimed at a more or less provisional – one might even say ‘fuzzy’ – conclusion, reminiscent of dialectic, or that Taoist logical equivalent, where dualism is constantly eliminated by the yin-yang cycle. Of course, the mind rarely settles for the provisional: several attempts are made to fix the image, to say something definitive about what the woman and her child see at the bus-stop –

The doe lay dead: she lent
her deadness to the morning, that the morning might have weight,
that
our waiting might matter: be upheld by significance: by light
on the rhododendron, by the ribbons the sucked mint loosed on the
air

– but each is quickly balanced by an antithesis, an open-ended concern for the living, both the deer and the child waiting at the bus-stop, who cannot be protected, cannot be kept eternally safe “in mild unceasing rain”, and our final view of the deer sets up a whole new set of possibilities: lying dead, at a distance, “her legs up and frozen”, she comes to look like two swans, fighting, or coupling, or “stabbing the ground for some prize / worth nothing, but fought over, so worth *that*”.

Now, in an instant, in what Dickinson calls “a certain slant of light”, the

feared resurrection, the “ghostly blossoming” has come to pass, but in a different, unanticipated form:

And this is the soul: like it or not. Yes: the soul comes down: yes:
comes
into the deer: yes: who dies: yes: and in her death twins herself into
swans:
fools us with mist and accident into believing her newfound finery
[...]

and though this vision is not as frightening as the anticipated “blossoming”, the speaker remarks that it should be: a different fear, perhaps, like the fear we owe beauty, or the divine, a kind of sublime panic, as:

we watch her soul fly on: paired
as the soul always is: with itself:
with others.
Two swans...

Child. We are done for
in the most remarkable ways.

All the while, language has struggled to make sense of the scene; now we close with a soft, heartbreaking word-play, a beautiful ambiguity. Yet the poem has created in its reader an odd breathlessness, a giddy onrush similar to the rush of a panic attack, not in the usual sense, but in the old, true sense of a meeting with the cloven-footed god.

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Panic. If ever there was a term that needed redefinition – or rather, clarification – it is this. Panic: “a sudden and excessive feeling of alarm or fear, usually affecting a body of persons, and leading to extravagant or injudicious efforts to secure safety”. So *The Shorter Oxford* tells us, explaining that, originally, this emotion was occasioned by an encounter with Pan, whose “appearance or unseen presence caused terror and to whom woodland noises were attributed”. Yet this is much less than half the story, and it presents the Ancient Greeks in a remarkably patronising light, as mere superstitious pagans, fearful of the wind in the trees or some looming, possibly spectral predator in the undergrowth. It is a definition that forgets the story of Pheidipides, the Athenian youth who meets Pan in the woods as

he is running to seek help from the Spartans against an invading Persian army: true, this meeting strikes terror into the young athlete's heart, but it also inspires him to continue, and gives him the strength not only to finish the round trip to Sparta (where his request for help is denied) but to go on to Marathon and take part in a great victory before running back to the waiting Athenians with news of their salvation. Here, in its Greek original, panic is more than fear, more than terror: it is a glimpse into the fabric of the world, a glimpse, after all, of the divine, and it fills its recipient with an inspired awe, a more-than-human vitality, as well as a terror that, while understandable, is recognisably a by-product of the encounter with the goat-god, rather than the main event.

I would not wish to suggest that this panic has national borders, however. American poets are discovering it anew, just as European poets, from Seferis to Celan to Eliot, rediscovered it in the middle of the last century. One of the most beautiful, perfect and economical expressions of that panic appears in Eugenio Montale's 'Ossi di Sepia'; lacking an English translation of the poem, I quote my own rather loose and profoundly inept version of it here, purely by way of illustration:

Perhaps, on a day like this, the morning air
like cut-glass, I will turn around to see
the miracle:

the nothing at my shoulder, utter void
caught in the sudden twist
of a drunkard's terror;

perhaps, like the beginning of a film,
the world will come again: houses and trees
and nuzzling hills, returning one by one
for the grand illusion;

though by then it will be too late
as I hurry on,
among those who have never looked back,
with my given secret.

But what causes this panic? Most fear is fear of injury, or of death, but panic will have none of that. Panic is the fear, not of the unknown, but of the unknowable. At the same time, it is the inspiration, the dark joy, that comes of the encounter with what cannot be known: the sense that something

orders the world, the sense that “all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well”, even if we can never comprehend that order and even if we, as individuals, are only fuel to its eternal flame. Panic is the moment when we apprehend the divine in the fabric of the everyday, and see that it moves independently of our hopes and fears, carrying us forward a little way, then letting us fall, easily, naturally, as leaves fall from a tree in the autumn. It is a glimpse of the void itself: that regenerative, all-consuming nothingness from which we all emerge, and into which we are all destined to return.

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When I was a child, there was a brand of 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. People believed this once – that honey came from the bodies of dead animals – but nobody believed it when I was a child, so it was, for me, a first brush with metaphor in its most obvious manifestation, a metaphor of change and continuity that meant more, at some private level of spirit, than the public imagery of church. In a recent poem by Robert Wrigley, ‘The Other World’, this metaphor reappears, as the poem’s human protagonist finds an old buck dead in the woods:

Here, already bearing him away
among the last drifts of snow
and the nightly hard freezes,
is a line of tiny ants,
making its way from the cave
of the right eye, over the steep
occipital ridge, across the moonscape shed-horn
medallion and through the valley
of the ear’s cloven shadow
to the ground,
where among the staves
of shed needles and the red earthy wine
they carry him
bit by gnawn bit
into another world.

It is a beautiful poem, from a poet who can say that the song of a meadowlark “sounds to me like reason”, but can also speak, in the same collection, of the true, classical panic:

Now all rodents are emboldened,
all owls through their talons knowing,
down the limb-bones and capillary fretwork
of roots and holes, that every living thing's
about to bolt,
even the tiny dumb animal
of my sleep, having for how many hours now
cowered under the rock of possible dreams –
look, there it goes, a whip of a tail
running for its life [...]

This, for me, is a perfect foil to 'The Other World': where one speaks of the process by which organic reality is visibly renewed, the other tells of the terror and awe that comes of not knowing, of never being able to know, how that renewal works. As an epigraph to the collection from which these poems come (*Lives of the Animals*, Penguin, 2003), Wrigley quotes D.H. Lawrence: "And as the dog with its nostrils tracking out the fragments of the beasts' limbs, and the breath from their feet that they leave in the soft grass, runs upon a path that is pathless to men, so does the soul follow the trail of the dead, across great spaces." A perfectly appropriate epigraph for this book, but also one that reminds me of another of Lawrence's sayings, "There's not a shadow of a doubt about it, the First Cause is just unknowable to us, and we'd be sorry if it wasn't." As human creatures, unable to bear very much reality, we feel wonder, awe and panic when space opens for a moment and, in a meeting with an animal, or a glimpse of "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower", we see into the fabric of the world itself; a vision that both reaffirms the continuity of that world and leaves us doubtful of our own place in it, other than as creatures to be transformed into new lives, new forms, in which nothing of the flesh and the dreams that are so tender to us can survive. This, for me, is the question that lies at the heart of the most interesting contemporary American poetry, a question that one finds elsewhere, in Spanish and Italian writing for example, but which British poetry tends to avoid, wary of its potential pitfalls: what contemporary US poetry has, it seems to me, is a method – a showing forth of the process of reflection, a revelation of a provisional and ever-shifting internal dialectic – that much British poetry refuses to pursue, informed by a bad faith that says it is better to avoid such matters altogether, in order to avoid any risk of sentimentality, or pretension. Better, it seems, to say nothing well than something badly. Better, of course, to say *something well*.

All of this is flawed, of course. We say different things, and sometimes very little is said at all on either side of the gap. Sometimes we say the same things, and sometimes our methods are not entirely dissimilar. There is, however, a trend in US poetry that I have identified in the poets mentioned above, and in others: this trend of bringing forth the internal process of reasoning, where the poem resembles something improvised, sometimes at the expense of the polish we, on this side of the water, so value. Larkin derided John Coltrane's improvisational method as presenting us with nine possibilities, when he could have chosen just one, and in this he may have had a point. He was also, without a doubt, being deliberately unfair. As unfair as the British poet I mentioned at the beginning, when he spoke of Jorie Graham in such a dismissive way. For, while it is true that Graham could present us with an end point – and only the end point – of her process of reflection, it is also true that this is *exactly what she does not want to do*. What she wants, as I see it, is to reveal a way of thinking, a way of seeing, that is new – new, that is, in the manner that Heidegger called for, when he said that our philosophy demanded a new mode of thinking. This new mode of thinking, and so of being, is based on a fuzzier logic, a more provisional set of parameters, a more tentative notion of the self and a stricter internal life than we have heretofore been prepared to accept.

Most of all, this new mode of thinking demands a new mode of seeing what we thought we had seen – and properly described – before. For instance: what we have tended to think of as nothingness, or – for the more Romantically inclined – the *abyss*, is, if we consider Eastern thought, also the origin of all things, what has been referred to, for want of a better term, as the creative void. A shift in thinking comes with Sartre's notion that *le néant hante l'être*, (nothingness haunts being), at first sight one of those fashionably pessimistic 'existentialist' *bon mots* of the Parisian mid-century but, on closer examination, an idea that proves beguilingly ambiguous. We look into nothingness and we see either a personal abyss or a generative source, a cold void or the moment before the Big Bang, the generator of the initial singularity. Yet nothingness – absence or even, in the Japanese ceramic tradition, boredom – has so often been invoked as the point at which human creativity begins. As John Cage remarks:

Our poetry now is the reali-zation that we possess
 nothing Anything therefore is a delight

The new mode of thinking embraces both these ideas, and proposes a

synthesis, but, for the individual, this synthesis is founded upon a paradox: as we celebrate the creative power of nothingness, we also celebrate our own erasure as persons; as we lament our erasure in the long continuum of creation, we also lament creation itself, which, to continue, must expunge us from the earth in order to bring new bodies into the light of being.

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One poem by Jorie Graham, the exquisitely beautiful ‘Holy Shroud’, (from 1991’s *Region of Unlikeness*), begins with the imagery of nothingness, in stanzas that invoke “deadwinter”, “empty lot”, “stubblefields”, “desolation and cold”, “sour milks and the acids / of tin”. Into this bleak landscape come flocks of birds, “every last cardinal for miles”, drawn by a particularly free-fruited thornberry:

Now they’re lifting as a large cloth would
into a corridor of sun,
maybe three hundred sets of lungs
drifting in unison, showering around this single blade
of sun like so many
minutes.

The cardinals haunt the “back of the mall”, trying to make a home of that desolation,

threading in and out of the discarded
photobooth, necklacing it, trying
to nest in the plexi face-plate
someone kicked in
after maybe three thousand faces had leaned
their images upon it

– trying, and succeeding, to bring it all to life, “with their bodyweights and tiny / leaps” to draw a “storyline, // down over the whole barrenness”. At this point, the poem pivots: the “large clot” of birds, settling into the place where three thousand faces have “leaned their images”, suggests the form – “the face which is His / which is not our looking” – that “emerged” from the Turin Shroud on the night of May 23, 1894. *Emerged* is the important term here, for this poem, and the collection from which it comes, is all about emergence, about what we look for, and what is given, about what comes forth from the world and what must be discovered by imagination, by faith,

by doubt. When Secondo Pia was working on “his last attempt at a clear print / of the holy shroud”, we are told, the darkroom hummed and:

A face looked out at Pia from
the bottom of the tray,
a face no one had ever seen before
on the shroud, a face
that was, he said, unexpected. A face. A thing
whose stare overrides
the looking.

The sight of this unexpected face causes Pia to faint, as the print “floated / to the surface of the surface / where it lives now.” Yet when the shroud is put on public display, “covered with stains and lined with / red silk”, the effect is far less dramatic:

When they held it up to us
we saw nothing, we saw the delay, we saw
the minutes on it, spots here and there

which is exactly what reason would suggest. The shroud is held up, the sun presses against the façade of the basilica, “like an interrogation light”, the shroud’s ten keepers stare out into the crowd, and it seems that, like the “tiny heads and bodies of saints [...] and the stone arrows in the stone flesh”, this is merely another artefact, a religious image created to encourage the faithful. Yet this – the seeming absence of proof, the nothing, the ground of possibility, the point of emergence – is exactly the point; and the crowd, it seems, know what is required of them:

we tried to see something, little by little we could almost see,
almost nothing was visible,
already something other than the nothing
was visible in the almost.

– and so it is that, like the cardinals, we make our place in the world by finding the “storyline”, by drawing it down “over the whole barrenness”, as we collaborate with what is there and with what is not, making our “tiny leaps” part of a world that emerges, minute by minute, from the almost. In this work, the “nothing” is our responsibility: we see in it what we are able to

see, and what we see is true.

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And this, in the current climate, is what makes American poetry dissident. At one time, dissident poetry seemed only to originate in obviously totalitarian countries, places where ugly dictators with funny moustaches and wide uniforms suppressed even the most minor of liberties. We failed to recognise the creeping advance of what Jonathan Franzen has called “cultural totalitarianism”, a mentality that has led us to where we are now; especially in the United States, where the apparent consensus is anti-intellectual, fundamentalist, literal-minded, self-righteous and xenophobic to a degree that has not been seen since the 50s. One of the strongest counter-currents to this cultural totalitarianism is American poetry’s insistence on the provisional, on the dialectic, on the bringing forth of the thought process, on the metaphorical. Of course, American poetry has always been dissident; what is new about today’s poets is that they not only challenge political and social conventions but investigate a new way of thinking about the most basic facts of existence, and by so doing, demand a new way of being in the world, in an era when the only meaningful existence is one that gives up its limited, ego-based concerns, and dedicates itself to what James P. Carse has called “the infinite game”.

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