

Poems
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Poems

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The Poet at the seaside

“The sky is fired enamel;
the sea is a dish of hammered pewter;
The sun’s a round door open on a white-hot furnace;
and beach the dented memory of a day’s doings. Yes.
But what, then, are the birds, that hang in the wind,

fall to the sea, stitch back and forth - are they..?”

‘Excuse me..?’ He ploughs through thick sand to me,
holding out a cheap camera. He’s young, unformed, but given
authority and shape by her caressing eyes. She clings to him,
not wanting to untouch. ‘Can you take our picture, please?’

They arrange themselves, their bodies intertwined
as if they’re wriggling to be inside one skin,
though each’s recently put-on self - they are so young -
awkward as new clothes. I compose the photograph.
I want all this, this moment of this day, exact,

to flow into the camera, alchemize the emulsion,
astound them when they look. They want a snap.
I click and hand the camera back. They thank me,
head up the beach, towards the town, the evening, the night,
hand in hand, their bottled memory swinging nonchalantly.

Angel Falling

or

An angel on the verge of a nervous breakdown talks to God

Night comes

like a woman's scented scarf

slowly falling

onto the land crumpling to a gaudy reflex

of the firmament's chaste perfection

warm

from the touch of her neck lightly

perspiring

and closeness to her soft breasts...

Again again again! the strain of being
unable to touch, of not being seen,
known only by the effects of what I do,
aware always of the itch that bodiless
I cannot scratch... This realm,
so restless, prodigal, destructive,
vital - why did You place us near
a world so repellent, so alluring?

We came into being adoring You
illuminated by Your radiance
one with Your goodness
knowing only You
wanting nothing.

Did our perpetual glorying bore You,
our untemptable worship weary You?
Did You yearn for belief that comes from faith not experience,
praise from beings that had a choice?
Or did Your restless probing produce in timelessness a knot
of time from which their world haphazardly evolved?
Did You perhaps discover that You weren't in fact the Author of All,
but part of something bigger, in which their world was a given...?

*

I know I shouldn't think like this -
shouldn't think at all, really -
but, this close to them, one gets infected.
You stationed us here to do what little good
we can: a wisp of hope here, a flash
of wisdom there, a moment of the eternal...
And to tempt us, yes -
The siren call of flesh!
How heroically we resist...!

Unless...

You want us to yield - we're Your gift to them,
to leaven their lumpen, soften their contumacy,
sparks of Heaven in their too fleshy lives...?

Now I understand You. Now I obey You.
I fall - into mortality.

The Love Poet - Medium and Message

It used to be he'd bleed onto the page
an opened vein trailing his despair
gunpowder of emotion dissolved in tears
each plunge into the well his heart as he poured
himself out through the mockingly flightless pen
his sobs decomposing his words.

Then his stamping hands tapped his frustration
each finger stabbed a key he hoped would be the key
sweeping away each failed line to a revealed emptiness
each letter branded, word tattooed
onto skin that he, unpeeling layer by layer,
added to the pile.

Now words appear as if a mind's brushing the touch-soft keyboard
float in space, move, change as if by thought, disappear
all memory erased - if only his was so -
perfectible in its eternal now; but not in his.
He wonders at its innocence when he is so involved
chokes back his passion as each virgin page emerges.

Two cats, white and black

I had forgotten cats, so much with dogs,
their bundled energy, their haunch-tense confrontations,
their lusts to please.

One barks, becomes all bark, beside itself forgotten
as barking into emptiness it fades, the universe pours in
around its drowning cry.

One, half-eyes watching, wound to seem to anticipate my wish,
to act, before expressed, according to my will;
for only in our complicity will it be.

But this: two blue marbles like islands sinking sighing
in a sea of cream that pink-tongued
laps and laps in self-consuming ecstasy.

And this: a pool of night dissolving distinctions;
light falls on it, sinks in, absorbed -
except two glints, reflections, so I see in gold convexity,
as in amber, what it sees. As they occult, I disappear.

Double Vision was an exhibition held at Sherborne House in 2005, in which several painters each took a poem as inspiration for an art work, and I wrote a poems responding to that art work. As a Sherborne House White Room event we read the original poems and my poems in the gallery beside the art work. This is the content of the pamphlet I made for the event.

Double Vision

The poem and the picture hang comfortably together. They are of a similar scale - a one man show and a book of poems are of the same order; a life's work - whether the few of a Vermeer or a Cavafy, or the many of a Browning or a Rembrandt - clocks up a similar number of 'art works'. Poets paint - D.H Lawrence, Lawrence Durrell. I feel sure Henry Miller painted because he couldn't, self-confessedly, write poems - his paintings were his poems. Blake, of course, who also shared with David Jones (for example) the art of combining poem and picture.

Poets reference art works, whether it's Auden using Brueghel's *Landscape with the fall of Icarus* to illustrate "About suffering they were never wrong,/ The old masters", or Rilke staring raptly at a Greek statue and concluding, in *Archaic Torso of Apollo*: "there is no part of him/ that does not see you. You must change your life". (Rilke, incidentally, once wangled several weeks' free board and lodging from one of his patrons by saying that he *must* spend time with a Picasso painting she owned so he could write a poem about it. Mmm.)

Moving the other way, Charles Demuth's poster painting *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* is an interpretation of William Carlos Williams's poem *The Great Figure*.

But these are examples, anecdotes. What is it that (lyric) poem and picture share? Typically, each is a single object, that can be taken in with one look; is, in effect, framed. Because each, to go further, is 'all there', now. So, an object, all there, that (at its best) creates a timeless realm, an endless now that the spectator enters into, explores, cogitates upon, and leaves, changed.

Each of these art works is a response to a poem. Each of these poems is my response to an art work. I looked at each art work and wrote each poem without talking to the artist or knowing what poem each was responding to. Time was short so these are sketches, stabs, *essais*. Circumstance prevented me from seeing all the pictures; the poems result from circumstance, not from any process of selection.

First take

Butterflies on a sunlit wall -
pinned? No, settled there
each scintillating with its eager life
its gift for careful eyes.

They freeze at my approach
armed as I am with net of notions
killing jar of metaphor, narcotic words,
sink camouflaged beneath my gaze.

Chastened, I withdraw. Collect myself.
Look at a picture. Let it be.
Allowing look to roam, wordless, promiscuously,
slowly, begin to see.

Greek diptych I: Church

In geometry expressed the physics of that faith
four-square evangelists with saving hemisphere
to cup believers absolutely in its saving grace

but surface marks, events, the everyday,
signs of lives lived not abstractly
but as effects in the painful beat of time.

Blue window on a turbulent sea
above it angel wings mirror an ideal sky
out there the sinking ship
where sailors continue to die.

Greek diptych II: Theatre

Proscenium arch, a stage, empty:
but the air vibrates - with figures fled?
Or a body about to roll, a sack of coal
down those steps, into literature,
stop dead. Agamemnon? Clytemnestra?
And scratched in blood the Furies' outraged condemnation.

Looking at a picture

Eye blizzard-bound, mind bent to bridge
the boiling Gulf with taming reference;
Turner fits - *Snow Storm, the Alps?*
Or one he never painted....
Not good enough, the picture says.

Snowfield, a fence, storm,
view from in a cave, the battling elements,
light and dark, oppositions.... Stop.
Words as metaphors, mere substitution.
Not good enough, the picture says.

Look away. Other pictures now have more to say,
and objects - pots, upholstered chair, a sunlit roof -
more easily identify their natures. Is this then its job,
refusing definition, to clarify the vision?
Not good enough, the picture says.

Black, frame, white frame, contained commotion,
facture, brush strokes, sweeps of softness, jagged repetition -
self-defended against meaning, it establishes a place
where artist, art, materials co-create.
Not good enough, the picture says.

Menelaos grappled Proteus through seven incarnations
until defeated, fixed, the ancient of the sea answered the Greek's question.
Jacob wrestled the man all night, demanding he give his name,
which the man refused to give, but blessed him for his striving.
The picture is silent. I begin to look.

On Reflection

A pool absorbed in self-reflection,
Archaean, of a time when time was measureless,
the first thought, thinking itself.
(Narcissus passed this way an age ago
and seeing nothing, passed on.)

A fleeting bird imprints its image suddenly,
ashes the pool to wakefulness;
the jungle irrupts clamorously,
pool shivers in its new awareness.
Will it settle back into itself? No, time is ticking on.