

A note by Anne Stevenson on the Bloodaxe Lectures, 2016

Between the 23rd February and the 3rd of March 2016, I travelled from Durham to give the three annual Bloodaxe Lectures to a warm, attentive audience at the University of Newcastle. The working title of the Lectures was *We thought we were living now, but we were living then*, from my poem 'The Fiction-Makers', but when Bloodaxe Books publishes them in 2017 they will appear under the perhaps more intriguing name, *ABOUT POEMS, and how poems are not about*. The new title developed from an idea Wallace Stevens put forward in his book on the poetic imagination, *The Necessary Angel*. It was Stevens' perception that poetry differs from prose in not being directly *about* things or people or ideas or public events. I quoted Stevens, 'The poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words.' and 'Above everything else, poetry is words: and words, above everything else, are in poetry sounds.' Stevens' views are not, of course, definitive or final; many good poems exist that *are* about things – political poems, comic and satirical verses, narrative poems, poems of memory. But it's been a hundred years since the so-called Modernists broke the chains of prosodic rules in English verse, and I suspect the wide spread popularity of do-it-yourself poetry today has arisen at least partly as a reaction to the high-minded elitism of poets like Stevens and T.S. Eliot by shifting the emphasis from reading or reciting well-known poems to writing poems of one's own. Poetry is no longer the prized possession of specialists, of schoolteachers, academics, poets themselves and critics. Neither are a few great poems considered to be the work of a few dead men, written to be memorised or studied by less gifted admirers. Poems, so the argument runs, can and should be written by anyone and everyone who cares to communicate their feelings. What are words *for* if they are not *about* what they say? I called on Stevens among other major figures to argue on the other side: that poetry is indeed an art form in which words imply feelings and impressions that are not translatable into immediate 'sense'; that poetry first arose in conjunction with music and dance as an indefinable expression of emotion. As dance and mime perform for an audience through the body, poetry, like singing, performs through the voice of a poet to the ears of its listeners. To write it is to hear it; it is certainly no easier to write memorable poetry than it is to write memorable music.

Of course, words are not only sounds. As was made so much of by literary critics towards the end of the last century, words are also 'signifiers', symbols, pointers to objects, ideas, feelings, proofs, which all language (including that of music and mathematics) exist to identify. Language, in its immense variety, relates to reality in so many ways that philosophers are not likely soon to be out of business. Neither are painters and visual artists who like musicians work with non-verbal signifiers, creating images to impress the human eye as poets and composers create sound-patterns for the ear. What all the arts provide and have long provided can be best understood by Wallace Stevens' favoured word *imagination* – that common human factor that makes us unique among the animals, through which our minds are able to communicate and please each other beyond the claims of instinct or of the immediate moment. Art and religion, story and myth, vision and aspiration, and indeed mathematical proof and technological invention would have no existence if it were not for human imagination, source of all our creativity. Yet despite today's ever more wonderful (and terrifying) technological advances, we are still banished, like Adam and Eve, from any certainty of a social or personal paradise. Outside every Eden of imagined perfection lies the 'reality' of our animal life– Eliot's 'birth, copulation and death', the 'truth', falsehoods' and social complexities of the actual world we know and test through our sense experience and wilful, speculative minds every day.

In my view, it is too easy to hive off 'creative imagination' in the arts from the investigative imagination that gives rise to logical thinking and the scientific method. Imaginative writers, like religious believers, either project upon reality a convincing language of their own drawn from sympathetic observation (the realism of Robert Frost, say, or Elizabeth Bishop, but also of Sigmund Freud) or they replace reality with a persuasive or fanciful language of make believe (the verbal embroidery of Gerard Hopkins, or Wallace Stevens – but perhaps also of today's speculative string theorists and astrophysicists). My contention, implied in all three Bloodaxe lectures, is that the word 'imagination' means many things to many people, that 'making believe' is only one form of it, and that the insights of specialists, writers and scientists alike do not differ in kind from those of most thinking people. We all draw upon different aspects of the

imaginative faculty, which is as much a part of human thinking as the circulation of the blood is of the body. One might even say that knowledge itself is imaginary, or at least that it is impossible without projecting the conclusions of our minds and senses about the nature of the world outside us. For what do we 'know', as many a philosopher has contended, that is not a process of our brains?

Keeping the limitations of all knowledge in mind, and given the difference between what a lively imagination concludes from observation, experience or hearsay and what it is able to project from its private or socially induced desires and will to believe, it is easy to understand Wallace Stevens' contention that language in poetry, as distinct from language in common use for communication, has its own sphere of meaning and relates only obliquely to the 'truths' we witness in our daily lives. A poem, if it is to be a work of art, must reveal, like a piece of music or a painting, emotional elements conveyed by sounds, rhythms and references that are untranslatable into any language that is simply instructive or communicative. If it is to survive, a poem must be more than 'about' a specific subject; it must be, in Stevens' term, abstract. It must be 'the cry of its occasion/ Part of the *res* (thing) itself and not about it.' This is not to say, as some 'language poets' do, that words in a poem only relate to each other, but that in a poem, words are related by sounds and rhythmic patterns to shared feelings that are stronger and, in effect, more beautiful and meaningful (or, as some would say, more sacred) than literal or dictionary meanings.

Another major theme of this year's lectures (the source of my original title) was that change is time's one permanently reliable condition, that it continually transforms the present into the past at the very moment it opens the future to further change. I argued that without an understanding of how poetry has re-invented itself through history, today's present innovations are likely to remain rootless and unnourished. Drawing on lines from my poem 'The Fiction Makers', I did my best to trace the theories, fashions and beliefs of modern poets in America and Britain from the nineteen thirties to the present (the span, in fact, of my own lifetime). Giving special attention to the voices of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, Richard Wilbur and Robert Lowell, I spoke of how after World War II populist movements in the United States rose

up against a university based establishment, introducing a barbarian energy into the art while at the same time destroying its solid base in traditional rhythm and form. Each lecture featured poets I considers to be among the most effective of their kind, ranging from W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden to Frank O'Hara, John Ashbury, and Elizabeth Bishop. In my final lecture, I quoted extensively from poet friends and contemporaries: G.F. Dutton, Frances Horovitz and William Martin, finishing with a tribute to the voice and ear of Seamus Heaney.

Thinking in terms of publication next year, I have supplemented the three texts of the 2016 Bloodaxe Lectures with three essays originally given as talks in St. Chad's College at the University of Durham. Like the Bloodaxe talks, these had mainly to do with matters of form and sound rather than with subject matter as I began to reflect on Stevens' perception that it is a defining virtue of poetry that endures through time not to be *about* anything that could better or more clearly be said in prose. Finally, having had a number of second thoughts about *Bitter Fame*, my biography of Sylvia Plath (1989) I included a talk on this American poet's astonishing gift and tragic life, first given at the Ledbury Festival in 2013.

Written at Pwllymarch, Cwm Nant Col, North Wales in April, 2016.