



World Enough and Time

Some Notes On Poetry

CHRISTIAN McEWEN

IN *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram describes two friends meeting again after a long time. If we should chance to overhear them, he says, we might well notice “a tonal, melodic layer of communication” beneath the explicit meaning of the words, “a rippling rise and fall of the voices in a sort of musical duet, rather like two birds singing to each other.”

Each voice mimics a portion of the other’s melody, at the same time adding its own inflection, which is then echoed by the original speaker, “the two singing bodies tuning and attuning to one another, rediscovering a common register, *remembering* each other.” This tuning and retuning, this remembering, is what is called “entrainment.”

It is hardly surprising that human beings should attune to one other in this way. After all, we live in a rhythmic universe, in which the earth revolves around the sun and the moon around the earth. Our bodies are rhythmic organisms, containing breath and pulse and heartbeat. If you put two grandfather clocks in the same room, their pendulums will fall into unison within a couple of days. In the same way, when people talk or sing or move together, we tend to “entrain,” or synchronize our pace with one another. This is one of the delights of good conversation: not just the stated theme, the surface content, but the underlying pleasure of entrainment, the half-conscious *pas de deux* with someone else’s mind.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, the poet Robert Hass spoke of the power of syntax and punctuation, and how in reading a poem, even by one long dead, we literally “speak in *that person’s* breath”:

If I say “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time, / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death,” everything that’s happening in my physiology Shakespeare quite literally put there. It’s a very mysterious process. Probably he’s writing in silence, but he’s *hearing* all these vocalizations, *hearing* these rhythms, and when you take them in, you take in the physiology of the phrases.

The writer Jacques Lusseyran, best known for his autobiography, *And There Was Light*, was blinded in an accident at the age of eight. Despite his disability, he

became one of the founders of the Youth Resistance in France, and was later captured by the Nazis, and sent to a concentration camp. In his essay, “Poetry in Buchenwald,” he describes what happened when his friend Saint-Jean suddenly began to recite some verses by Apollinaire. “It was as though he came bearing news—good news that was going to brighten our wretched lives.”

Then Lusseyran himself began to recite. He chose verses at random, any he could think of. In a plain, undramatic voice he recited Baudelaire, Rimbaud. Little by little, another voice joined in, and then another:

Voices had timidly joined in behind me, and in front of me. . . .
Without even intending to, I began to recite more slowly. [Then]
more men came. They formed a circle. They echoed the words. At the
end of each stanza there rose a great hum of the last syllables.

By the time he paused to catch his breath, there were fifty men surrounding him, leaning towards him, swaying, crying out. Some of them were Russian, some German, some Hungarian. Most of the Hungarians were Jews, waiting for what the S.S. called “transfer to the sky.” None of them spoke French, not even a little, but “listening to a man recite poetry, they had thrown themselves upon it as if it were food.”

“I learned then,” said Lusseyran, “that poetry is an act, an incantation, a kiss of peace, a medicine . . . one of the rare, very rare things in the world which can prevail over cold and hatred. No one had taught me this.” In the weeks that followed, he threw himself into a poetry campaign. He would stand on a bench at midday, just stand there and recite poems. Passersby would stop, press in around him. He could

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feel their breathing, the relaxation of their muscles. And, “for several minutes there was harmony, there was almost happiness.”

EVERY piece of music, like every piece of writing, is made up of sound and pause, sound and pause, which is to say that *it also includes silence*. Miles Davis was praised by a fellow trumpet player for creating good music because he “opened up the space between the notes and stepped inside.”

In a predominantly visual and verbal culture, there is both relief and opportunity in this opening to silence. (It seems magically apposite that the word “listen” is an anagram of “silent,” and of course vice versa.) Yeats wrote in *The Celtic Twilight*, “We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us, that they may see their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life, because of our quiet.”

This quiet reflective self is little honored in our present world. But for those who are capable of such serenity, the rewards are vast. It can build a bridge not only to our friends and to the writers we admire, but to the dead also, including our own ancestors. T.S. Eliot said it well in “Little Gidding”:

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
 They can tell you, being dead: the communication
 Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

Here too, is the Scottish poet, W.S. Graham, in “A Note to the Difficult One,” written to a friend who had recently died:

This morning I am ready if you are,
 To hear you speaking in your new language.
 I think I am beginning to have nearly
 A way of writing down what it is I think
 You say. You enunciate very clearly

Terrible words always just beyond me.
 I stand in my vocabulary looking out
 Through my window of fine water ready
 To translate something beyond any idea
 Of pleasure. The wisps of April fly
 With light messages to the lonely.

This morning I am ready if you are
 To speak. The early quick rains
 Of Spring are drenching the window-glass.
 Here in my words looking out
 I see your face speaking flying
 In a cloud wanting to say something.

“I stand in my vocabulary looking out/ Through my window of fine water”—the welcome here, the patient readiness, is all. We are used, perhaps, to opening to our friends in this way, even to our beloved dead. But what of the non-human world? Can we listen to that too?

FOR eons, human speech has been enriched, inhabited, by the language of the wild: the seethe and gush of rainwater, the tinkle of icicles, the song of the birds. But as the outside world has been blasted and subdued, as the songbirds are silenced, and the streams diverted into culverts, that aspect of our language is being wrenched away. As David Abram has said, “When we no longer hear the warbler and the wren, our own speaking can no longer be nourished by their cadences.”

A friend who lives in the hills of western Massachusetts, close by a tumultuous little brook, told me of the visitor who arrived on her threshold eager to identify that “curious sound.” She literally did not recognize the music of the stream. But that music is still there, for those who listen. Thomas Merton, for one, was not afraid to find words for what he heard:

The rain surrounded the cabin . . . with a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside. . . . Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, the rain. As long as it talks, I am going to listen.

And the English poet, Alice Oswald, who makes her living as a gardener, says that listening is what she enjoys most about her work, and what actually leads her into poems:

I try to keep listening, letting each line grow slowly out of the landscape. I have my left hand cupped like an ear, and it feels as if I'm holding my mind in my right hand and a garden in my left.

For the Inuit people, as for many others, there was a time when all beings, human or animal, were understood to speak the same language. An Inuit woman called Nalungiaq spoke these words, early in the twentieth century:

In the very earliest time
 when both people and animals lived on earth,
 a person could become an animal if he wanted to
 and an animal could become a human being.
 Sometimes they were people
 and sometimes animals
 and there was no difference.
 All spoke the same language.
 That was the time when words were like magic.
 The human mind had mysterious powers.
 A word spoken by chance
 might have strange consequences.
 It would suddenly come alive
 and what people wanted to happen could happen —
 all you had to do was say it.
 Nobody could explain this:
 That's the way it was.

“A word spoken by chance might have strange consequences. / It would suddenly come alive.” This is the “life” that we are seeking: poets and shamans and ordinary human beings, all of us now, in search of that infinitely healing conversation. Can we listen to each other, can we listen to the dead? Can we listen to the birds in the rain-drenched garden? Can we allow some time to pause, some time for silence? 