

ENDNOTE: Maurice Manning

Meditations on the Lightbox

Therapists recommend a curious device for persons who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD): a lightbox. The SAD person is encouraged to stare into the lightbox to modulate his or her melatonin levels. I have never tried using a lightbox, and, fortunately, have never really needed to, but as a poet and teacher, the word *lightbox* holds some appealing contradictions. It suggests first of all that light can be contained, which in practical scientific terms is impossible, and secondly (also paradoxically) that light could be present in a box, presumably filled with darkness. *Lightbox*, of course, is a compound word, and compound words have a way of forcing together two things that might not logically befriend each other. It is, in fact, a lovely equation for how poetry happens: light in darkness equals illumination. And, of course, poetry depends on paradox.

As a teacher of writing, I have developed my own version of the lightbox to enhance my students' ability to look outward in a genre often associated with introspection. To accomplish this, I read them three poems. The first is Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Pied Beauty," in which the poet declares, "Glory be to God for dappled things." The dappled things he goes on to mention include rose-moles on a trout, speckles on finches' wings, and the clashing of plowed and fallow fields in the same landscape. Hopkins is exultant. He realizes that all things go together and that, in fact, what we see is always made sharper by the presence of contrast. To see the one leaf waving on the tree, we must also see at the same time all the other leaves sitting still. For Hopkins in this moment, these things are luminous. The short, eleven-line poem is like a box in which he has managed to capture light. "Pied Beauty" is also an excellent example of what Hopkins called "inscape," the inward-pulling design of a natural object—which in turn reveals a further paradox: even though the poet is looking out, he's seeing in.

Another (contrasting) poem is John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," with its famous lines, "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, / Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains / One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk." (ll. 1-4). Clearly, Keats's state is one of severe gravity. Note the numerous references to isolating darkness: "But here there is no light"; "Darkling I listen"; and "To cease upon the midnight with no pain" (ll. 38, 51, and 56). In these darkest passages, he is going farther and farther in to himself, and is "blind" to anything beyond his own emotional state. Yet sleep he cannot. After burrowing down through image after image of self-awareness, something finally wakes him: the luminous nightingale singing outside. Whatever light Keats needs in the dark box of himself comes from outside himself: in this case, the nightingale, which ultimately moves farther and farther out, pulling Keats upward.

A third, more streamlined poem to consider is William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow." In a single sentence, Williams manages to combine the lofty yet vague notion of "so much" with what seems like a crude and homely tool, the wheelbarrow.

So much depends

For complete poem go to:

<http://poetryfoundation.org/poem/174770>

Before Dr. Williams is a scene of order and beauty. It has presented itself to him, but he must look out to see it. The "so much" exists only in his consciousness as a dim abstraction, and with a sudden flash of illumination, the burden of consciousness gets dumped into the wheelbarrow as if it were a stump or muck from the barn.

Reading these poems has been a liberating experience for my students, many of whom tend to have a hard time thinking beyond their own physical experience. As writers, of course, a certain amount of introspection is essential, but high doses of self-consciousness can lead to poems that are not outwardly bound, that are (to a certain extent) closed circuits. And as Hopkins, Keats, and Williams suggest, self-consciousness is something to escape!

For those of us who read, teach, and write poetry, the lightbox is another way to talk about and encourage contrast. Contrast forces leaps; it wheels us away from sameness. Notice all the contrasts in Williams's short poem—red/white; liquid/solid; stasis/motion. Keats is no exception: he is transported from his despair by the sudden recognition of difference—his own monotone drowned by the bird's melody. The same goes for Hopkins. I suspect that in the moment before he unleashed his praises, he had been looking at his own routine life, his unlit stage—but then he looked out and found "all things *counter*, original, spare, strange."