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‘All would benefit from this book, not just because of what it has to teach, but for its subtleties . . . Innovative and lively.’

Duncan Wu, Georgetown University

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For information about this and other Yale University Press publications, please contact:

U.S. Office: sales.press@yale.edu yalebooks.com

Europe Office: sales@yaleup.co.uk yalebooks.co.uk

Set in Minion Pro by IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd

Printed in Great Britain by TJ Books, Padstow, Cornwall

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020944662

ISBN 978-0-300-25191-3

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the unflagging encouragement and support of Sandie Byrne.

I owe an ongoing debt of gratitude to fellow members of the Hall Writers' Forum who have given me feedback on many individual poems. In addition, I am extremely grateful to Carol Atherton, Jared Campbell, Jude Cowan Montague and Mike Spielberg for comments on the whole collection in its early stages.

For their warm support when I was seeking publication I would like to thank Carol Atherton, Sandie Byrne, Carmen Bagan, Jon Cook, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Jonty Driver, Penny Fielding, Jane Griffiths, Kenneth Gross, David Morley, Tom Moysen, Bernard O'Donoghue, Seamus Perry, Nicholas Royle, Rowan Williams and Duncan Wu.

Many thanks to Julian Loose, my editor at Yale University Press, for believing in this book and giving me expert guidance.

Lucy Newlyn
Cornwall, 2019

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resistant) to pastoral traditions might be encouraged to think about how the poetic methods illustrated here translate into other settings. I hope that the book will be useful to lovers of poetry as well as to practitioners, and that the poems will also stand on their own, to be enjoyed as discrete artefacts, accessible to readers of all backgrounds in the English-speaking world.

I
Foundations

Crossing the beck

What if you liked the nettles round that milk-stand
more than the burnished crowns of distant trees,
or felt more at home walking the fells
than sitting by the fireside?

What if you couldn't quite make up your mind
between paths on either side of the bridge?
Would you keep crossing back and forth, to check
that nothing had changed in the meantime –

or would you station yourself somewhere
in the middle, a lover of suspended choice,
looking both ways
and relishing the sound of water?

It's peaceful here. You can listen to sheep
bleating in the meadows. You can look a long way
upstream, to where a golden viaduct climbs
from hill to hill in five grand arches.

What do you gain, though, by standing still?
Does it trick the person watching over there
(who, on reflection, looks very much like you)
into thinking you're on both sides at once?

Go home now and stop kidding yourself.
Sit down by the fire and imagine. Take up your pen
and position your mind anywhere it likes.
You can search on either side if you need to.

The poem you write will straddle two worlds.

Language makes a crossing, to and fro –
metaphor is a viaduct, or bridge.
You can move freely now, even in stillness.

Subject-matter and register

There are many ways to cross the water.
You could, if you felt grand,
choose the viaduct – golden-stoned,
five-arched, huge-thighed like a god.
From up there you could look back to survey
the scene in reverse: the beck
a thin silver band, the ash tree a smudge,
the bridge a minuscule bow.

But you seldom get this far, preferring
the bridge by the milk-stand, which gives
a closer view at its own level of each bank.
Sometimes you use the stepping stones
upstream, where rushing water narrows.
You like to linger here, messing about
in the shallows. This is a place for glimpses.
You've always loved the pebbles, blue-grey and smooth;
the freckled trout, motionless under their mossy ledge;
the beck's dancing surfaces, its sparkle.

Up on the viaduct, you were a spectator.
Here, you're immersed: a child at play,
losing all sense of time in reverie.
When you're done, you walk back to the bridge
along the far side, crossing slowly to the milk-stand,
the nettles, and your home. In your pocket
are three stones, to remind you of water.

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it meets a sudden stop.
Enjambment gives the subtle flow
of the beck's onward motion.
A stretch of end-stopped lines
is like a basin penning in the words.
A break mid-line, like a protruding rock,
divides the water – but only for a moment.
The stanza is a natural pool made by a shelf or dip;
here you pause and note the silence
before and after.

First, still yourself on one side of the water,
then look to the far bank as you sing each line.
Attend to the sudden inlets, jutting promontories
and let these subtly interrupt your breath.
A listener must hear
alterations, hesitations
in the stream's flow
and picture in their mind's eye
what you, the writer, already know:
how the water is so wide and shallow beneath the bridge
you can hear it ripple on the pebbles
which hold the flickering shadows of fish;
how it wanders lazily through open fields
then straightens, steadies, stills;
how it narrows and deepens
to a pool
under the leaning ash
then meets the lip of the fall with a roaring rush.
Listen for the beck's spirit
in its voice; watch for it
in the dancing line on the page.

Figurative language

What if, admiring only precious things,
you walked forever on the strange far shore,
selecting what you liked from all that's there?
Those wet stones, sparkling with points of light
and marbled like the shifting tones of sky –
are they more worth your having than the ones
on the near bank, so plain and grey,
but tinted in a subtle weathered way?
Smoothness and hardness are properties
of each alike: these will not fade with time.
Both kinds of stone can be transported home,
each placed upon the mantelpiece for show,
but one has shimmering surfaces, which lie.
Choose carefully, you'll surely always need
both for the purposes you have in mind.
Look for what you need in every stone you find.

Rhythm

To walk or run you need to place your feet
firmly on the ground – or else you'll slip around.
The same with reading and with writing verse:
without the rhythm you won't get the sense,
so you must focus on the sound. It's in the sentence,
not the line, that meaning can be found.
Read aloud for the poem's sense; read aloud
for its rhythmic sound. You'll get the measure
of the line, each step taking you from left
to right. Look ahead for the next foot in sight.
Listen for the heavy beat; this steers the feet.
Sometimes the rhythm stumbles, as though
tripped up by something on the ground:
here the sense comes before the sound.
Just counting syllables won't help you find
what the rhythm is, but it can be a guide.
Don't be distracted: keep listening for the sound
and check your feet. Read always
for the steady measure, the prevailing beat.
Placing one foot after the other, you walk the line.
A heavy stress will fall upon the rhyme:
this can lead you, help your voice keep time.

Rhyme

This pool is both a sacred echo chamber
and an ever-changing everlasting mirror:
a place where shadows slowly glide
and flashing silver fishes rise
to catch pond-skaters where they slide and ride.
Throw pebbles in the pool, stand back and watch
the ripples spread, to touch the other side,
making waves in water, sometimes twelve feet wide.
Listen to them plop, and then the echoes
bouncing back in seconds from the sheer rock wall.
Stay to hear the undulating wash:
you could be standing here for hours – feet planted,
rapt by ripples, losing all sense of time.
Few people on this earth are not enchanted
by echoes, and the widening rings of rhyme.

Stanza

From the bridge, a clear view upstream
shaded by overhanging trees:
enclaves of narrow darkness
which again and again punctuate
the steady flow of water.

From the sky, a series of patches,
regular in shape and size,
interspersed with waving bands of green:
a necklace of marbled beads
threaded by glittering silver.

Wading the beck, a clear view
of all that's below the surface:
rock pool after rock pool teeming
with the stream's continuous life,
each pool an individual chamber.

On the page, segment after segment
passing before your eyes like rushes in a film
and heard like verses in a song:
each portion a part of the living stream,
each part a stanza.

Metaphor

In a metaphor, you are the figure crossing.
How suddenly that happens! What's this
appearing so quickly on the other side?
It reminds you of something you've half forgotten,
something you wanted to leave behind –
yet it looks different, so why are you reminded?
Where has the bridge gone, what has happened
to the small burden you were carrying? Did you
drop it in the beck, distracted by something?
It's good here, a great place for walking:
new things to look at, nothing to hide.
You'd be happy to search here a little longer.
Everything looks sharper, clearer, more alive.

Synecdoche

In the fields around the beck you'll search
for things that resonate with meanings
larger than themselves. On the near bank,
these are hard to carry around: what is signified
is partly identical with what they are,
which cannot be transposed. That rock over there
is part of the mountain which bears its name
just as 'ash' means both a kind of tree
and one special tree bending over the water.

But cross over and you'll quickly find
that things carry an aura.
The bending ash signifies a unique emotion.
Its luminous clarity gives it amplitude,
like a Wishing Tree, or a meaning
so private it would be hard for you to say.
Objects glow here, in a kind of revelation.

You must keep revisiting things nearby
to make sure they are your own
but the ones from the far side will go on
gleaming long after the light is gone.

Metonymy

A figure stands at the low end of the bridge
on the side near the scruffy nettles
and looks across to where
the field slopes under the tree, just before
you reach the first stile. He pauses,
searching for connection in the landscape.
There's little resemblance between
the grass under the sycamore
on the far side, uncannily smooth,
and that on the near side, which is
rough and grainy. To stay this side
is to prefer familiar associations.
He wanders back to the milk-stand
then up the steep road
to the viaduct, connecting things
seen on the near side with each other
but never crossing, never joining
what is seen on the other side – though looking
over there, sensing its possibilities.

Symbol

A figure has crossed the bridge and climbed
the third stile into the buttercup field,
walking steadily, purposefully.

The tree she looks for is on this side
where everything
is in heightened colour.

She can recall the way the tree bends over the beck
just by the waterfall; knows its weeping shape,
the water's sound through moving branches.

This place corresponds in some mysterious way
to a soul. It has a radiance of meaning
that inheres in the way it is – and must be
communicated, so all can feel.