

Poetry Matters: The Unconveyable

By J L Williams

Nothing could be less conducive to reaching an art-work than critical remarks: it's always simply a matter of more or less fortunate misunderstandings. Everything cannot be so easily grasped and conveyed as we are generally let to believe; most events are unconveyable and come to pass in a space that no word has ever penetrated; more unconveyable than all else are art-works, whose mysterious existences, whose lives run alongside ours, which perishes, whereas theirs endures.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

Over the years I have found myself interested in the ways that poetry differs from other types of literature such as novels, essays and newspaper articles. Poetry is formally very different; its structures and layout on the page are vital to the way it is perceived and read/heard in space. It also has a unique ability to play with and convey meaning. Poetry is a time and space machine. Using metaphor and image, it can leap between time and place, it can compress space or stretch it out and it can talk about one moment that lasts forever or, as William Blake so beautifully wrote, 'Eternity in an hour'. I often think that the real material of poetry is space and silence, and the words we choose are the architectures which make that space and silence visible and audible. It is the 'in between' the lines and words of poems, or the territory of the 'unconveyable' as Rilke puts it, where the meaning of a poem often lies, and this is part of why poems can seem difficult in terms of accessing straightforward meaning.

Many people are taught from early on that they should make sense and that in order to communicate we need to make sense. Making sense is good and not making sense is bad. If we're spending time trying to communicate then we should be clear so that the other person has some idea as to what we're on about. These notions of sensibility can be useful; for instance, when managing people or designing systems that allow people living together in a society to get along. Yet there is so much in our world, our existence, that doesn't make sense, or that resists communication.

I have a huge respect for and delight in science and the extraordinary discoveries

that scientists are constantly making; shedding light on old mysteries and bringing new mysteries to light. Yet I also have a deep interest in the idea of the unknown, in that which by its very nature cannot be known and may never be understood. Is it possible that one day all will be known? Or is the idea of the *known* only possible if there is also *the unknown*, that infinite and eternal shadow, sighing at its side?

Epicurus said 'Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not.' I find this idea, which has been passed down for so many generations, as powerful and comforting as it likely was to those who studied with Epicurus. It speaks to our fears of the unknown; the unknown is related to death, death is the ultimate unknown. Death is a nothing or negative state, unknowable by its very nature so nothing to us really, and yet the fact that we can imagine that which we *cannot comprehend* is challenging and often terrifying. Many art forms confront and explore these ideas, however it is especially apparent (and particularly disturbing to some) in poetry because the medium of poetry is language, the very same language which we expect, in most cases, to make sense. In everyday language, signs (which are words) point to agreed-upon objects and ideas in order that these signs can be used to navigate the world and our relationships with one another. In poetry we can begin to point the signs in funny ways, to lead toward a path into the unknown, and many find this unsettling.

For instance, we might choose to say, as Google does, that loss is:

the fact or process of losing something or someone

Or we might say, as the poet Michael McGill wrote in one of my recent poetry workshops:

So what is the sound of loss
but of wet floors, drying slowly?

By considering the sound of loss, rather than loss itself, and composing the image of water evaporating off a wet floor, Michael created a deeply meaningful evocation of the emotional and temporal conditions of loss. To my mind this couplet captures the human experience of loss much more accurately than the straightforward definition of loss. The word's definition is useful and necessary as a starting point. But the opportunity we have in poetry is to build a word space

that does more than define. With the contents of its toolbox (metaphor, image, repetition, abstraction, rhythm and so on), a poem can communicate aspects of an experience that are just as authentic and meaningful but which lie outside/beyond the definition of a word or experience. Poetry can get at the truth of what lurks around the edges of words via what might be an even more meaningful way of conveying our experience of existence.

I find this ability of poetry to use language to point the mind in unusual directions to be one of its greatest powers, and I get excited when it pushes further into this realm of experimenting with how we convey and in fact how we think about meaning. The poet [John Ashbery](#) ('Still, there's a lot of fun to be had in the gaps between ideas./ That's what they're made for!') writes poems that often seem to avoid typical ways of making sense, and while they frustrate some they are beloved by others. In *New Criterion*, William Logan said of Ashbery, 'Few poets have so cleverly manipulated, or just plain tortured, our soiled desire for meaning.'

And perhaps Logan's phrase, 'our soiled desire for meaning', captures something that Rilke was also talking about when he spoke of the difficulties involved in criticising poetry and art. Why do we seek meaning, and what sort of 'meaning' satisfies us? What happens when we strive to provide answers to unanswerable questions? Is it *enough* to receive an answer, any answer, to questions such as 'what is the poem about' or 'why are we here' or 'what is the point of all this'? With so much available to distract and entertain us, how much time do we really spend asking questions, and how long are we willing to sit in a state of unknowing? What is it to remain in an aspect of questioning? Isn't some of the greatest art and writing ever created by humanity that which asks questions, that which points us toward the darkness and leaves us there to contemplate?

This season I've started a new event at the Scottish Poetry Library called [Criticism Playpen](#). Its goal is to encourage people to read and write poetry criticism and reviews, because I think these are excellent ways to engage with poetry. Yet I also believe that it's vital to keep Rilke's, and Logan's, words in mind when reviewing poetry. One has to consider the purpose of a poetry review and its audience. Is it an academic essay? Is it striving to place a book in its historical context or contemporary landscape? Is it teaching poets about what is interesting to a reader of their poems? Is it giving readers a taste or encouraging them to buy the book? Reviews and criticism can function in all these ways and more, and it is

debatable whether the best reviews come from those who can be objective or those who are determinedly subjective. I don't want a review to try to tell me what a book *means*. The joy of reading a poem or experiencing an artwork is contained within my experience of perceiving it, and I don't think anyone knows me well enough to say what that experience will be for me. I appreciate reading reviews that lift the skirts an inch or two and show me the ankles of a book and of one reader's experience of a book. I enjoy reviews that wet my whistle or, when a reviewer hasn't had a good time with a book, pique my interest in what they didn't enjoy. I like it when a reviewer shares their particular experience without expressing universal judgement of a book; when they talk about what they noticed rather than what the book achieved or failed.

It can be frightening to think about writing a poetry review; certainly as a poet it feels like exposing one's self in a very different sort of way than by publishing poems, and in a relatively small community such as the poetry community in Scotland, or even in the UK, it feels that it would be all too easy to offend someone. Also, I agree with Rilke and with Logan. As a poet, as a teacher, as a reader and as a member of the human race, I am deeply interested in learning how better to sit quietly with the unknown, to immerse myself in the vast silence of the infinite beyond my comprehension and to feel what that non-knowing is without trying to understand it in the logical, rational way that I have been taught to think about the world. I don't want to cling to ignorance, but I do want to explore (in my poems, through meditation, in my experiences with other people) ways of understanding the world that don't necessarily have a beginning-middle-end, that don't add up and that aren't easy to explain in the kind of language used in newspapers or scientific journals. I stand by my belief that one can do all this and still respond in writing to other people's poetry and art in ways that are useful and interesting to both critic and reader, and to the poet. We can be as creative, sensitive, compassionate, challenging and, dare I say it, abstract in our criticism as we can be in our art-making, and playful as well. That's what I'm hoping to explore with my colleague and co-workshop leader, the poet and critic [Dave Coates](#), in Criticism Playpen and with a growing community of poetry readers and writers who are engaging critically and responding creatively to contemporary poetry in Scotland.

It is the critics, he said,
the critics have the ideas. We artists
(he included me) — we artists
are just children at our games.
— Louise Glück

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