

IN PERSPECTIVE



JEMMA BORG Perspective in Poetry

Like Wallace Stevens in *The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain* finding “at last, the view... / Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea, / Recognize his unique and solitary home”, I’m looking down from the construction that is poetry and wondering how the view’s changed. Have we moved on from the image of Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*,

the romantic (male) figure who stands in heroic position on a peak, alone, gazing at a mountain which is like his counterpoint/companion/alter ego? Are we ‘above’, ‘alone’, a gigantic ‘I’? In order to speak better, to witness our times, we are asked to be more open, to transcend our own circumstances, to listen to other points of view and voices that have been repressed or silenced until recently. Poetry has become more about the experiencing process itself, the sense of ‘being a part of’, becoming what we see or feel (though not making ‘the seen’ conform to us or preconceived ideas). A loosening of the ego, an increase in mindfulness, an aesthetic of writer as ‘hollow reed’ who listens intensely. To write what the poem (not us) wants to say is elementary, but also the difficulty and discipline in the art. On the other hand, how do you write a poem in the voice of the voiceless – ‘let nature speak’, as Alice Oswald says? However closely we identify, we can never be a tree, say, but we can experience an entanglement of our senses with it. Elizabeth-Jane Burnett’s *Swims* is a great example – try to get to hear her reading this aloud to really appreciate it. Sensuality, porousness – these are the qualities of an (eco)poetic that allows the self to disappear into the larger world. We are not ‘above’ or ‘alone’, we are ‘within’.



ALISON BRACKENBURY Perspective and Social Media

I am short-sighted. When I laboured over poems for my first pamphlet, over forty years ago, I was myopically focused upon place. But the final line of one of its better poems – set outside the locked gates of Kew – sounded a new note: “Time”...

Clumsily, poets stumble into prophecy. Time was the light through those locked gates. There is wonderfully vivid poetry in the present tense.

There is also the long perspective of a life. The centenary of the First World War, for many people, marked an event remote from memory. But, fifty years before, I listened to my grandfather bawl “Mademoiselle from Armentières”, which he sang on marches and in disreputable bars: “estaminets”. The poems I scrawled as an old woman borrowed words I heard as a child: the door into his war.

Time brings the gain of the long view. It is also fraught with loss. Where are the fields of cowslips my father saw? Where is winter? Roses flower in December. It is not only poets who stumble. We all stand on the edge of a climate cliff. Poetry is no substitute for lobbying, voting, or using consumer power. But it is part of the weather of our culture. If poetry is to warn, it can do so well through memory and experience. If poetry is to offer hope, it can do so by summoning what is most precious, and vulnerable.

Yet poetry itself is vulnerable when it is technically weak. The final perspective a writer must have, at any age, is to write better, even though the effort to do so may rob strength from other parts of their life. We do not know how long we have. Guiltily, I often remember Richard’s II’s cry: “I wasted time, and now doth time waste me.”



KATHY MILES Perspective and Social Media

We usually think of the poet's perspective as being a personal affair, unique to that particular writer, and arrived at via a process of constant self-questioning. But in these days of interaction and collaboration, the individual voice is also influenced by the wider perspective, especially with regard to social media.

In a recent interview for *Wales Arts Review*, Cynan Jones observed that in these turbulent times, writers 'increasingly face the challenge of 'having to write about issues'.' This begs the question of whether that obligation itself, the duty to write, can become the main driver for the poetry. Social networks are powerful places, enabling poets to promote and share work to large audiences, and Facebook groups such as 'Poets for the Planet' provide focussed communities for those interested in specific topics. They also generate many co-operative ventures, such as Carol Ann Duffy's 'Write Where We Are Now' pandemic project, which invited contributions via Twitter.

But these platforms are also places where the perspective of the writer is greatly exposed, and this can impose a moral responsibility directed by peer pressure. Whilst the interactive opportunities they provide are to be welcomed, the poet's perspective may become partly motivated by a wish to conform. Polonius's injunction 'to thine own self be true' obviously doesn't allow for the Facebook 'hive-mind' that encourages uniformity of attitude dictated by current mass-trends of social media thinking, where poems are 'liked', retweeted, and discussed in globally-transparent forums for their polemic as much as their quality.

Social media has many positive sides. The weight of public opinion can effect meaningful change, and here, the poet's voice can make a real difference. But the best poetry takes already deeply-held views and overlays them with the personal, regardless of popular trend or a desire to be part of majority consensus.



LINDA SAUNDERS Some telescopic notes on perspective

To foster an illusion of depths and dimension on a flat canvas, a painter places one thing in relation to another, or several others: foreground to background and distance, here to there and beyond. She (maybe I – and note this tool in a *poet's* perspectival kit bag) uses a fixed point of observation from which to work a kind of perceptual

magic. For a poet, to 'put things in perspective' is not an illusionist technique, but a means of 'rounding out' her apprehension of the world, time, life in which she finds herself.

As poets, too, we may take multiple perspectives, moving through time to explore serial versions of reality, as well as 'looking through' the eyes of others. We call on powers of empathy and imagination and language to give meaningful depth to our own experience, and escape the flat canvas of our self-bound human limitations. John Burnside writes (in *The Music of Time*), "Poetry has the power to make each one of us think anew about the natural order and our place within it, to recognise and appreciate the world's complexities."

