

COMMITTING POEMS TO MEMORY

The poems are there. I do not have them down.

By that I mean, I have memorized them, word by patient word, sited and recited them, and know them, in that peculiar way each of us knows poems, but a change of voice, or mood – or if spoken out loud to someone new, I am liable to be thrown, stopped, balked of my desire to impress, like a performing monkey, with another feat of memory.

The poems are there. Some were harder to commit than others, and harder to commit to, once learned. *The Moose* was one of those former; *Fern Hill* one of the latter kind. Mnemonics play their part – regularity of structure, rhythm, and rhyme – but with Bishop, whose rhyme-schemes are irregular (suggesting half-rhymes in addition to those placed), and whose line lengths vary from “where a woman shakes a table cloth” to “but doesn’t give way,” you have to hang onto something else, her way of saying, which is close to ours but not quite, and in that difference lie the pitfalls of assumption.

Assume nothing. *Fern Hill*, which dances so dangerously close to becoming one, long, sonorous whine, employs the other, major pitfall I’ve encountered: near but not quite repetition (really, when you think about it, an extended form of half-rhyme), both in content and in stanzaic structure. Thus “time let me hail and

climb” mirrors “time let me play and be”: same stanzaic place, same semantic structure, same rhythm. But the rhetorical moment occupied by “the night above the dingle starry” and “in the sun that is young once only” (third line of the second and third stanzas) simply vanishes in stanzas three and four (for me, at least), then reappears in stanzas five and six. For me. For how these poems go down, swallowing them (a metaphor I’ve been trying to avoid, but there is no help for it), will differ between you and me.

Anyway, my point about *Fern Hill* is, I’m not very fond of it, these days; perhaps it’s my age, more probably Parkinson’s, but I cannot afford that kind of luxurious regret. So I say. And it is very hard to hold onto someone from whom you avert your face. So the other day, I was on the subway, and then the streetcar, heading up University and then along St. Clair, digging out Dylan Thomas, and loving it. Because I had let him go. Because, there, in transit, he came back, the cock on his shoulder, and it was all shining. My mind felt like it was eating solid food. I exulted in recollection and therefore, could again exult with him, whose wishes raced through the house high hay.

My mind wanders off. At the end of each stanza. Sometimes, as with Rimbaud, at the end of each line. That sends the frozen groundswell under you, and makes gaps. And so much of my time is spring mending time. Who’s the

neighbour? Parallel metaphor, hidden imagery, and the mystery of why one phrase should be more memorable to us than another. There where it is we do not need the wall: the poem is all pine and I am apple orchard. Take for example this: "Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound." Shall I let pray – two hands in prayer, two hands that are husks (don't ask me why), corn husks, wrapped around the cob, praying for rain. And then the stalk itself throws a shadow, and a wind rustles it with all its fellows. There's the sound. Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound: a field of corn praying and swaying in the wind, casting their shadow on the ground.

That's parallel imagery. For the root of memory (and all mental processes, I believe) is metaphor: something paired with something else. "Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace / And forth the particulars of rapture come."

And then there are the things that simply cannot be said any other way, that cannot be misremembered because they make no sense. I say this happily. Pound's transgression of *The Seafarer* is a superb example of this, almost pure sound.

Sometimes I hear others reading the poems, especially the voices of teachers or, occasionally, the poet him or herself, as with Frost, whose recordings make me weep for the sweeping meanings they add to the poems without giving them so much as a sideways glance; Stevens reading *Idea of Order*; and cummings' superb, practiced, arrogant, pitch.

There are inter-echoes but these come later; they do not help me memorize the poems as they are. Obvious ones, “I am nobody,” to far more idiosyncratic echoes, such as “Castaway, your time is a flat sea that doesn’t stop” with “like an eye between two pupils that will not shut.” They are the fruits of meditation and long bus rides in the dark; they are poems talking to poems, not poems to poets or poets to you; they are the gold in the ore, or, or of a storied mind.

Why do this? Because a sharp mind is sharper than a dull one. Because there are acres, literally acres and arpents of time, in which we do nothing but tug at our brains like dogs tied to stakes by the roadside. I would set out for somewhere; I would make the reckless choice. Because Parkinson’s often means I cannot hold a book. Because someone told me Parkinson’s affected memory. Because the ancients built memory palaces and the idea appeals to me: a series of interconnected rooms the doors and windows of which I continually discover. Because *Le bateau ivre* is a superb marching poem. Because I exercise to Sir Philip Sidney’s *Eighth Song*. Because I pray for my father with dooms of love and meditate with *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*. Because my wife asks me in to recite in the car. Because I believe the poets themselves are listening. Because I love.