

Memory, Writing, Politics: the Poetry of Peter Reading

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The Mnemonic of Poetry

Sean O'Brien closes an essay with this aphorism: "This extremely literary poet tries to show us a world before literature gets at it" (146). Although it refers to Peter Didsbury, it could just as well be said about Peter Reading. On the one hand, Reading is a learned poet, whose life work has already shown an unparalleled variety of traditional and experimental forms of poetry; on the other hand, he is an outsider keeping a distance from literary life and trends. O'Brien has characterized him as a post-romantic poet, and pointed out that the basic principle in his verse is fancy rather than imagination. Both categories were introduced by Coleridge (and then adopted by a number of romantic essayists); the former means aggregation, the latter transformation (124).

Although O'Brien's statement is an inevitable simplification of Reading's texts, it still calls our attention to something significant: Reading is a poet of accumulated experience. Selection seems to be more important to him than transformation in the romantic sense. Coleridge wrote about choice, fancy, and association in Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*:

The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phaenomenon of the will which we express by the word *choice*. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association. (167, emphasis in the original)

This is only partly true for Reading's poetry: although nearly all of his poems can be interpreted as the representation of memory, association is not a guiding principle. Just the opposite can be discerned in his texts: Reading uses association itself as a subject matter, and he explores its mechanism. Therefore, I need to revise my previous remark: Reading is not simply a poet of *memory*, it is more precise to say that he is a poet of *the act of remembering*. The target of memory can be practically anything (a text, a social event, a verse form, etc.), but the poet is always interested in what it

will become in the present act of recollection. Consequently, his lyric poetry is the opposite of elegiac poems: what is *done* in romantic verse, or even in Philip Larkin's poetry, is *perceived* in Reading. He is also an outsider in this sense.

Nevertheless, in another sense, he is romantic in principle since he sees his life work as an organic whole. He has commented that his poems are related to each other as the chapters in a novel (*The Poetry Quartets 3*). Of course, a poet reflecting on himself can be even more simplistic than a critic is. Therefore, we should be cautious with accepting this view. It does not mean, in the first place, that most of his poems cannot be understood and enjoyed in isolation. But undoubtedly, the cohesion in Reading's poetry is remarkable: some of his volumes contain only one long text, he has written twin texts, self-reflexivity is a spectacular feature of his poems, and many of them can be interpreted as the re-reading of an earlier text.

His volume of collected poems (that is, in Reading's own view, his "novel") starts with nature poems. One of these, "Raspberrying", uses a traditional pattern: the description of a landscape is followed by the contemplation of the implied poet, and the poem is closed with a generalizing conclusion. But the opening lines seem to be disturbing, since the speaker notices ugliness, rather than beauty, in nature:

Last sun ripens each one, through rubicund, black
then each rots. Lines are tight with late swallows,
oak rattles leaves icicle-brittle...

The speaker sees a landscape, but he remembers the conventions of landscape poetry. The essence of remembering is the comparison between a sight in the presence and a form in the past:

A bit neo-pastoral, one will admit,
but then something conspiring to make decay more
than the usual end of a season makes Nature
itself as anachronistic today
as a poem about it.

The opening line of stanza 2 reflects on the first one by admitting that writing nature poetry without the traditions of pastoral poetry is impossible. In this convention the essence of an autumn poem is that decay in nature is transformed into a symbol (or, at least, a synecdoche). It is exactly this *form* which makes nature as 'anachronistic' as a landscape poem. This very text may be added to Reading's own ideas. Something can be called anachronistic only on the basis of remembering its former modes of existence in the past and comparing it with the present. Exploring the act of remembering proceeds line by line: it starts with acknowledging convention, continues

with the protest against it, and closes with the act of writing a controversial text. In the form of classicist-romantic contemplation, the voice of the poet says that such contemplation is out of date. The question what nature means to us today is still hanging in the air, and it is answered in the last stanza:

Yet one feels almost justified still to acknowledge
 the deeper reflection of, albeit hackneyed,
 the Human Condition in Nature (reduced
 as she is from the nympho once over-extolled
 for ad-nauseam cyclic fecundity, to
 today's stripped-bare and thorny old sod half-heartedly
 whorily pouting a couple of blackening nipples).
 (*Collected Poems* 37)

We can still use nature as a signifier of human existence, but then we need to find the ugly and the base in it. This is why the blackened raspberries are transformed into the distorted nipples of Mother Earth. The poem seems to ask: what can a poet do with a nature that has been destroyed? The answer is complicated, not only because the poem has even been written, but also since the implied poet regards it only as "almost justified". He does not say that writing nature poetry is impossible today; he only suggests that instead of mechanically applying conventional patterns, we should consider the essence behind existence, namely the significance and consequences of destroying nature.

Remembering is the topic of another early poem, "Mnemonic". The opening sentence ("I will think of you in three ways") could be read as a sentimental confession in isolation, but the title gives it a completely different meaning: the function of the poem is not expression, it is setting up a model for a technique of mnemonic. It is a text about practising remembering and the use of the verb *think* suggests that the basis of all thinking is memory. This reading is reinforced by the three groups of images which the speaker enumerates as the attributes of the person remembered, and which are even numbered to evoke the atmosphere of conscious exercise. The three basic images are those of the working, the painting, and the socializing person (perhaps a lover or a friend). The easiest meaning the reader constructs is this: one can only remember another person if one is able to recollect him/her as s/he is working, doing a creative job, and relaxing. But there are at least two further layers shining through this surface.

One is the representation of accidentalism. The speaker's selection of past events is emphatically accidental and concessive. (The word *or* is used seven times.) Consequently, remembering is inevitably selective and manipulative: through our selections we manipulate ourselves. When we

think that something comes into our minds accidentally, our unconscious has already done this, successfully.

The other layer is that of intersubjectivity as the speaker in the poem is getting closer and closer to the subject that he represents. He introduces the first part with the words *at work*, and the recollected objects (an in-tray, the lost top of a pen) are mentioned as the attributes of the represented person. This tacitly anticipates the opening of the second part: "and more the real you, painting". The implication is that the person formerly known 'at work' has a 'more real' self. But the speaker cannot enter this subjectivity, since in the third part the point of view changes: the speaking and remembering subject becomes the object of the other's perception and cognition. This change is similar to what happens in Douglas Dunn's poem "Young Women in Rollers", where the implied poet transforms himself into an object by creating the viewpoint of working-class women. But while Dunn is within the situation and is interested in class differences, Reading observes the dangers of his own mnemonic from the outside. The focus of his attention is the act of remembering.

Another aspect of the same topic can be discerned in "Ballad", which can be read as a poem about the collective memory of literature as well as about the oppressive power of recollection. It narrates a story in the modern world, but is written in traditional ballad stanzas. This form has always been popular in British poetry; therefore, Reading's poem creates a link with a living tradition. The poet remembers a form that is still present. The reader (depending on her/his former experience) can associate it with modern ballads such as W. H. Auden's "Miss Gee", Blake Morrison's "The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper", or James Fenton's "Children in Exile". But these texts are also different from one another: Auden's poem is a psychological case study, Morrison's is an experiment in combining literary conventions with a contemporary dialect, and Fenton's is a text of social exploration (to mention only the most spectacular meanings of these poems). Reading's poem tells a trivial, even banal, story in conventional meter; consequently, it can be read as a parody.

The two lovers in the poem, John and Joan, spend some happy years together as university students, then get tired of each other, split up, and both marry someone else. Ten years later they meet by accident, and they tell each other about their broken marriages. No catharsis follows this event; the poem ends with John's bitter laughter. Real life only lives in their memory; likewise, the poet is only able to tell a contemporary story by using a form lingering in his memory. "Ballad" is a piece of light verse, which laughs at the constraints of the characters and those of the poet at the same time. The objective correlative of these constraints is the applied

literary form itself, since the convention of the ballad stanza is incongruent with the lack of catharsis.

The horizon of expectation on which a new poem appears for an individual reader determines his/her reading. As Reading's "Ballad" testifies, the convention of a literary form may bring it home to us that the value represented by this particular form has become impossible in our culture. This is the value of purification through sin and overcoming sin by remorse or penitence; a value well known from traditional ballads. Thus, the title of the poem reflects both on a poetic tradition and contemporary culture, and depicts its own alienation from the past, signified by a literary genre. "Ballad" is not a ballad, since it lacks a firm and unchangeable moral value system.

The Dialogic Memory

Significantly, the subject matter of conventional ballads appears in different forms, as can well be seen in the three brief texts of "Duologues". The first of these is about a girl who grows mad after losing her sweetheart:

'. . . See,
 er bloke (im as ad that motor bike crack
 comin ome off the piss that time Gonder's Neck way)
 e got buried in Boultibrook churchyard
 as lies back of the farmuss, so
 as er looks out er bedroom er sees is stone and
 they reckon as ow evertime er thinks on it.'
 (*Collected Poems* 99)

The phonetic spelling of dialect forms, on the one hand, recalls the world of medieval ballads; on the other hand, they also alienate this language from the reader, merely by the act of using it in writing. Spelling distances the dialect both from the standard forms of the language and the fictitious speakers. The *speakers* of a dialect are not necessarily the *writers* of the dialect since written forms are always closer to standard language than the spoken word. In the text quoted above we *hear* the voice of a peasant, but *see* the words of a conscientious and accurate chronicler. Thus a traditional feature of the ballad form is reconstructed: the tension between impersonal narration and the dialogue makes the simultaneous insight and judgment of the reader possible.

The narration of the above-quoted poem is determined by two subjects—those of the speaker and the writer. These two are contrasted (also visually) in "Parallel Texts":

(A bucolic employee of
South Shropshire Farmers Ltd.)

You remember that old boy Marsh?
—im as lived at Stokesay?
—forever picking is nose?
Well, this morning ees takin
some cattle over the line
(course they got underpass, like,
but also the level crossin
as mostly they uses),
an 7.15 from Stretton
runs over the fucker
—course kills im, like, never
you seen such a mess, cows an all.
Still, it dunna matter a lot
—ee were daft as a coot.
(*Collected Poems* 155)

(*The Craven Arms, Stretton
& Tenbury Advertiser*)

A Stokesay farmer was killed
when he was struck by a train
on a stretch of track near
Craven arms. He was Mr John
Jeremiah Marsh, a 60-year-old
bachelor of Stokesay Castle
Farm, and the accident occurred
just yards from his home, at
Stokeswood—an unmanned level
crossing. Mr Marsh is thought
to have opening the gate.
The train which struck him
was pulling 39 goods wagons
on its way to Carlisle.

Typography imitates a distorted mirror image and both sides tell the story of the same accident. One text is in a phonetically spelt dialect; the other is a news item. This poem can also be read as a variation on and the aftermath of the ballad form, particularly if one reads it in the context of the whole oeuvre. It is the provocative callousness of the two texts that evokes sympathy with the man who died; this sympathy is a contemporary version of the classic catharsis. But most readers would probably see this poem as self-reflection first of all, since the vision of the accident raises several questions. Which story is the original one, and which is the mirror image? Is it the language of journalism that gives form to the raw material of dialect diction, or is it the other way round? Does the diction of the rural person fill the factual news item with life? These questions, of course, only serve to bring it home to us that they are not correct as no text can be identical with the event itself. Consequently, both texts in the poem are distorted images of each other.

The juxtaposition of different texts in some poems by Reading seems to be so accidental that it resembles the Neo-Dada. Importantly, this is only the first impression of such texts, since Reading is an extremely conscious poet. Contingency is not the guiding principle of his poems; it is their subject matter. "Ex Lab" is the monologue of an archeologist working in a laboratory, based on free associations, still fully conscious. The reader can detect when he works, when he takes a coffee break, and when his attention is distracted. This is the reason why different forms of communication and reflection are juxtaposed:

CIRCUS STRONG-WOMAN
 CONVICTED OF MANSLAUGHTER.
 STUDENT 'GOES MISSING'
 IN AFRICAN MYSTERY.
 SKINHEAD SETS FIRE TO CAGE-BIRD

In what's now Dorset
 one hundred and eighty-five
 million years ago,
Megalosaurus et al
 flenched, flensed these bastards to mince.
 (*Collected Poems* 231)

The scientist, who read his newspaper in the break, returns to his job with his mind still full with the indignation caused by what he has read. As a symbolic wish fulfillment, he plays with the fantasy of villains eaten by the dinosaurs he investigates as a part of his job. Remembering, however, is a complex process, and it creates a basis for more than just emotional fantasising. Archeology itself is also a rationalized form of remembering and a construction of the past, but it cannot be independent from the 'remembering' constructor: the archeologist.

The scientist becomes identical with the implied poet at the end of the poem, since a misprint reminds him of the Japanese meter called *tanka*, and his association immediately determines the form of the poem:

'SUPER-TANKA SINKS'
 (the misprint suggests Baroque,
 fugal, cumbersome
 development of the Five-
 Seven-Five-Seven-Seven...)

The typo that the persona has so fortunately found (*tanka* instead of its homophone, *tanker*) is a part of a five-syllable headline, which for this very reason could be the first line of a real *tanka*. This coincidence forms the basis of the stanza, which reflects on itself; a stanza whose theme, in the strict sense, is its own form. It is constructed as accidentally and arbitrarily as the past is in the hands of the archeologist. This is suggested in the next two stanzas, also written in *tanka* form:

What one enjoys most
 is the manipulation
 of these hapless things
 at such impartial distance
 to fit an imposed order.

Of course one does not
 really care for the *objects*,
 just the *subject*. It
 is a Vulture Industry,
 cashing in on the corpses.

(*Collected Poems* 235)

Like in the previously discussed texts, in this poem, once again, the speaker manipulates both the facts and himself. The meter, which was found by accident, suggests that finding remnants of dinosaurs is just as accidental. The intellectual is transformed into a scavenger (or necromaniac), and remains within boundaries, since his investigations lead to the representation of his own subjectivity rather than the past itself. Therefore, the significance of the Japanese pattern is not the same as it was, famously, for the imagists. Instead of aiming at the clarity of images, Reading creates a link with the form only through the shape, the number of syllables.

The affluence of forms also means the eventuality of forms in Reading. His virtuosity lies in his ability to write practically in any traditional meter and structure from the Petrarchan sonnet through Greek distichs. Their accidental choice is the subject matter of "10 × 10 × 10", whose unorthodox title means a self-imposed rule: the poem consists of ten stanzas containing ten lines of ten syllables. The actual theme is the invention of the form itself. After the protagonist falls down on an empty stage the poem closes with these lines:

When he regained
 consciousness, he was considering the
 arbitrary nature of the Sonnet—
 'One might as well invent any kind of
 structure (ten stanzas each of ten lines each
 of ten syllables might be a good one),
 the subject-matter could be anything.'
 (*Collected Poems* 131)

Thus, the text goes back to the title, and the reader can just as well start reading again, since the poem itself is a sequel to the last lines. Of course, one can conclude: our lives today are so far from the values represented by poetry that life and poetry can only be linked with arbitrary forms. This reading would fit in the whole of Reading's life work, still such poems fall in the category of light verse, and they also signify the dangers of this type of lyric poetry. It is remarkable how often Reading says (or at least suggests) the same, and his gestures of self-reflexivity are also repetitive. This has led to mannerism in some poems, which is particularly noticeable as the oeuvre

is so coherent. If one reads Reading as he himself wants us to (that is, as a cohesive whole), a less successful poem also casts its shadow on the other texts.

Nevertheless, the duality of following and making rules is an organizing principle in his poetry, which makes it not only coherent but also intellectually exciting. The implied poet can be identified as somebody entering the realm of literature from the outside, but also as a very open person full of fresh ideas. This is why he tries his hand at the most difficult rhythmic patterns, and also why he sets up strict formal rules for himself. He explores convention both as something that can be followed and as something inevitably accidental. Apart from the texts mentioned above, further examples of self-made rules are the volumes $5 \times 5 \times 5 \times 5 \times 5$ (1983) and *C* (1984). The title of the latter is ambiguous: it is both the Roman numeral for 100 (the volume consists of a hundred texts, each of a hundred words) and the abbreviation of cancer. As Neil Corcoran has written, these volumes are narratives woven around "a single central preoccupation" (254). This is also true for those later volumes in which reflection and contrast as organising principles are even more important than in the earlier ones: *Ukulele Music* (1985) and *Perduta Gente* (1989).

Forgetting and Seeing through Texts

Ukulele Music consists of fictitious letters and texts written in classic Greek meter. The former are supposed to have been written by a cleaning woman called Viv; these are messages spelt and composed awkwardly, left on the piano for the employer. Viv appears as a tragicomic figure, since her communication goes one way: there are no answers to her messages, at least at the level of narration. On the extradiegetic level, however, we can read the texts written in Greek meter as replies to Viv's letters. If we make the hypothesis that the employer is the implied poet himself (and this is the most obvious explanation for his omniscience and the possession of the letters), then each poem is a reflection on Viv's messages and the newspaper articles that are related to her family. Two-way communication is replaced by endless dissemination and the media itself as a subject matter.

To put it more concretely, Viv's letters are the imitation of a primary experience; consequently, the whole volume is about the relationship between experience and literature. This is the 'preoccupation' that Corcoran has written about. The next few stanzas are a good demonstration of the complexity of this relationship:

What is to one class of minds and perceptions exaggeration,
is to another plain truth (Dickens remarks in a brief

preface to *Chuzzlewit*), 'I have not touched one character straight from life, but some counterpart of that character has

asked me, incredulous, "Really now *did you ever see, really, anyone really like that?*" (this is the gist, not precise).

Well I can tell that old cricket that this is JUST how we speak like, me and the Capting and all (only not just in two lines).
(*Ukulele Music 36, emphases in the original*)

The first feature most readers would notice is the meter: Reading's poem is a perfect distich. Not only does this dispel the myth that it is impossible to write English poems in Greek form, but it also demonstrates that one can even *find* lines in regular meter. To be precise, Reading has slightly modified the original text by Dickens, as he himself admits. This is what one finds in the preface to *Martin Chuzzlewit*: "What is exaggeration to one class of mind is plain truth to another. [...] I have never touched a character precisely from the life, but some counterpart of that character has incredulously asked me: 'Now really, did I ever really, see one like it?'" (7) The "quotation" in the poem shows very little difference from Dickens's sentences since Reading has only inserted and changed a few words. The original text is clearly identifiable, still perfect in meter.

The last stanza makes Viv speak. Unlike in Tony Harrison's poetry, in Reading it is not the confessional implied poet who colonises the heritage of classic literature, but a fictitious character, a construct of the poet. Dickens's observation is also related to her: there are no exaggerated literary characters, only points of view showing something as exaggerated. This seems to be a problem of literature, but essentially it is more than that. Both Dickens and Reading suggest that if we are unwilling to accept the constructs of literature, we are blind to reality. Continuing the narrative and the chain of ideas, Reading writes about facts and their textual representation in a later part of the book:

**Gillian Weaver aged 22 walking 4-year-old daughter
home when a girl and three men—hang on, this isn't just news:**

Gillian Weaver aged 22 walking 4-year-old daughter
home when a girl and three men push her to pavement and steal

£3 from purse—she sits weeping and nursing 4-year-old (let's not
wax sentimental re kids; let's stick to facts, here *are* facts).

(*Ukulele Music 41, emphases in the original*)

This passage is about the well-known paradox that for a subject facts exist only through their interpretation. More than that, it is also about those methods that transform facts into texts. At the beginning of the first stanza

we hear the voice of a news editor, who considers various ways of reporting about a most appalling crime: a gang cutting the face of a young child to get the mother's cash. Facts may become either a headline or a Greek distich. Neither of them changes the tragedy, but the reader can face the facts only through the text.

The variety of texts is visually represented in *Perduta Gente*. This is a book consisting of poems, photocopies of diary entries and photos of torn documents, on 56 unnumbered pages. The title is from Dante's *Inferno*, and the volume shows a 20th century hell, in which unimaginable wealth and poverty, rationality and ignorance add up to chaos. The story shining through the textual fragments can be summed up like this: a homeless person, while fumbling in the rubbish, finds some documents, torn into pieces, which analyse the possible effects of an expected nuclear accident. The police detect the documents, labelled as strictly confidential, in his pockets or bag, and arrest him as a supposed dangerous thief.

This volume, too, can be read as a poem of memory. The establishment of the country does not want to remember the possibility of a nuclear accident and the documents have presumably been thrown away because they are not needed any more. The forgetfulness of the establishment has the same function as the drug abuse of the homeless man. Losing memory, an artificially caused amnesia, is deliberate and collective in both cases. The book represents an inferno in which the only collective act is getting rid of memory, which also means getting rid of thinking.

The question is whether it is possible to forget facts. We are surrounded with texts, even the dustbins are full of them, and all these texts work against amnesia. To represent this, *Perduta Gente* imitates the physical appearance of fragmented texts. The book is like the skeleton of a pseudo-documentary novel: the reader sees the documents that can become the *corpus delicti* for both sides at a future trial.

These two sides, the establishment and the homeless man, are linked with their points of view as both sides see the damaged documents as evidence against the other. In addition, the boundary between the two classes is blurred. A recurrent sentence in the book is: "Don't think it couldn't be you." As Peter Barry remarks: "Reading insists that new post-industrial patterns have meant a radical extension of socially coercive anxiety. The dispossessed 'other' could, after all, easily become none other than ourselves" (88).

Consequently, *Perduta Gente* can be read as a political poem, moreover, as a literary indictment. Its two central symbols, the fragments of texts thrown away and classic meter, are two signs of the same social chaos. This has been caused by the erasure of order from people's memories, and serves

the interest of those who play with other people's lives, whether it is done by experimenting with nuclear energy or by maintaining a high unemployment rate.

Epilogue: Reading's Individual Voice

The above-mentioned reading is only one of many possible interpretations. There are a number of ways of understanding Reading's texts, and—although he is a solitary poet who does not belong to any group—his poems can easily be related to other life works. It is not without reason that Neil Roberts has compared him to Tony Harrison: the duality of being an outsider and writing in extremely polished literary forms is a feature they share. The latter feature, for both poets, means that they reinterpret classic (mainly Greek) literature, and use it as raw material. The difference is that Harrison "colonises" the culture of Greek antiquity re-establishing its mythology, heroes, and stories within his own marginalized position, which leads to the construction of a new centre. Reading, on the other hand, has remained an outsider: it is no accident that what he has applied from Greek poetry is merely the shape of the poem, whereas his characters and narratives are from contemporary marginal life. He writes about containment in distichs and alcaic stanzas, and with this method he eliminates the privileged position of Greek meter. This is one function of juxtaposing literary and non-literary texts (and the emancipation of the latter) in his verse.

The result is that he is a much more impersonal poet than Harrison, who is very explicit about his class struggle; than Douglas Dunn, who has been constructing his identity in confessional lyrics; or than Ken Smith, who writes political-autobiographical poetry. A common denominator is their social interest and responsibility as a central value, but Reading is distinguished by hiding his subjectivity. What I have pointed out in his twin-texts and self-reflections also means that his self is out of the reader's apprehension. In other words, this lack of apprehension is the self. Thus, Reading has deconstructed the illusion of a homogeneous identity. All his life work published so far is organized around this principle, and this is the basis of his diction peculiar only to him. The lack of a romantically conceived self, of course, does not mean a lack of individual style or that of aesthetic pleasure.

The function of found texts and of juxtaposition is also unique in his poetry. He is not a poet of transformation, as Edwin Morgan is, and not one of a holistic principle, which forms the basis of James Fenton's poetics. Reading's formal virtuosity can rightfully be compared to theirs, but his poetry is *only* poetry. His poems are not related to the life work of journalism

(as in Fenton), that of literary translation (as in Morgan), that of the stage and the screen (as in Harrison), or anything else—Reading's poems are *instead of* all these. In this sense, he is also an "extremely literary" poet, moreover, he is an extremely 'poetic poet'.

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