

TALKING IN ALL: A CONVERSATION ON POETRY AND
QUAKERISM BETWEEN PHILIP GROSS AND LAURENCE LERNER

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ABSTRACT

This considered conversation between two widely published poets of different generations investigates the relationship between their creative work and the Quaker connections in their lives. In the process, both examine examples of their own and each other's poetry. Drawing on both their academic disciplines, in one case, literary studies, in the other, creative writing, they explore the possible tension between the simple integrity historically advocated by Friends and the imaginative sympathy with diverse experiences required by poetry and fiction. Are the demands of morality compatible with those of aesthetics, and how does eloquence square with plain speaking? In what sense can their writing be seen as Quaker, or themselves as Quaker poets? Lerner starts by asserting that there is no necessary connection between his Quaker and his poet self; Gross finds such a connection in a style of attentiveness, akin to listening. Both recognize the limitations of words to describe deep and complete experience. Poetry, with its pushing of language to the point of breakdown (a process both playful and serious) can point, like Quaker worship, into the wordlessness beyond.

KEYWORDS

Poetry, Quaker, integrity, imagination, language, self.

The dialogue that follows is a substantial and significant contribution to Quaker studies. This journal has been largely (though by no means exclusively) occupied with historical material, with research on different dimensions of the witness of Friends and with Quaker hagiography. The correspondence of two Quakers who are poets of some reputation outside the Society serves to broaden the disciplinary range of the journal and to support the academic fields that it represents.

I have known Laurence Lerner and his work since the 1960s when as a Sussex undergraduate I dwelt covertly in the corner of his large lecture theatre. More recently he has known me. Nowadays, as a blind person who depends upon the *Talking Book* I have listened appreciatively to the poems of Philip Gross. And as a stranger (an Anglo-Catholic) I thought I detected a Quakerly sensibility even before confirming his affiliation. I listened as though to a ministry in Meeting for Worship. There was a non-judgmental observation of some current phenomena, such as the furniture store Ikea, from which a lesson would be drawn and left for reflection. Perhaps distinctive ways of thinking and of presenting ideas become so habitual that they are more conspicuous to outsiders than recognizable by oneself and one's own kind.

If my observation had been of the external life of the poems, the conversation below is rather more about the inner life of the poets.

Roger Homan

PG:

Since 1984, attending Quaker meetings has been a regular part of my life. Two or three years before that it had become clear that writing poetry would be a central strand of who I was. That's nearly thirty years...and in most of that time I would never have mentioned the two in the same breath.

Like several good poets I know who are Quakers, I would have recoiled at the label 'Quaker poet'. Even today when I have 'come out' in both directions, as a poet among Quakers and vice versa, I could number the poems of mine that *mention* Quakerism on the fingers of, well, one finger.

And yet... When I talk about writing I find Quaker references on my lips, as simile or analogy, again and again. When I try to be honest and clear about what being Quaker means to me, the metaphors I use come back to poetry.

There is something to be explored here, and we have a context in which to explore it; I am writing this in conversation with Laurence Lerner, poet, critic, Quaker, and incidentally one of my lecturers at Sussex University a third of his life and half of mine ago.

In his 1984 Swarthmore lecture, *The Two Cinnas*, Laurence quotes the classic Quaker attitude to reconciling all orders of experience and knowledge. This is Evelyn Noble Armitage writing in *Quaker Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* in 1896:

Friends have no fear of what science, or art, or criticism, or any possible discovery or revelation, may make known. God reveals himself thro' every avenue of nature and life, and although different manifestations may, through man's imperfect sight, appear to clash, it is only an *appearance*; truth is God, and cannot be contradictory.

And Laurence replies, 'I admire those Friends for whom all experience is a unity, and who feel their love of literature is integrated into their Quakerism, but I am not one of them'. In that seriously playful lecture he dramatized the distinction between the different sensibilities and logics of, on the one hand, poetry and on

the other, political action—Cinna the unfortunate poet in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and Cinna the conspirator, for whom the unfortunate poet was mistaken by the mob. The cast list also includes a representative Friend, practical, moral, down-to-earth, 'more at home with committee minutes than with haiku or Spenserian stanzas, daggers or letter bombs'.

LL:

Indeed... I knew someone who was also a Quaker and very actively interested in poetry—in fact I think she ran a poetry society, or was it an activity of the Open University? I remember she turned up at a poetry reading I was giving, and I had a nice red shirt on. 'Ah', she said, 'I see you've put your poet's costume on tonight'. I hadn't thought that way when getting dressed, but I felt (perhaps with a touch of guilt) that what she'd said made sense. She was telling me that the poet and the Quaker were not the same person, and that I knew it.

But let me begin with a warning—or with more than one. First, I no longer write poetry: I decided some time ago that I should stop. I found that I had largely lost the drive, and that if I did write any more poems they would come out like paler imitations of poems I'd already written: that must have been at least fifteen years ago. But I'm still the same person I was when I wrote the poems, and whatever I say in our correspondence will come from the same person. I don't believe—any more than Eliot did—in the wisdom of old men, but I hope wisdom hasn't been replaced by mere folly.

And second, I don't think there's anything Quakerly about my poems. Indeed I almost think they're unquakerly, coming out of quite a different self from the Quaker. This is similar thinking to what made me call one of my books *Selves*, and in fact I could have used that title for much of what I've written. I don't much believe in a unified self which holds all of us together, and would go so far as to say that it's this lack of a unified self which leads one, or at any rate me, to write poetry.

I have a great respect for the Quaker view that one should be a unified person, but I am not. I feel (and have felt more strongly in the past, when I was still writing poetry) that I'm more like a crossroads or a playing field on which different selves encounter, learn from and quarrel with each other.

I used to ask myself when still writing poetry if there was any kind of person who would be incapable of writing a poem. What about a Nazi? When Philip and I were in the same poetry group I once brought along a poem which did just that. It was a dreadful poem, and I no longer have a copy, and I remember Philip thought—and said—how dreadful it was, but something made me feel one should try one's hand even at that. I once read a book by Robert Brassillac called *Les Sept Couleurs*. Brassillac was a once-celebrated writer who was also an admirer of Nazis. There is an account of listening to Hitler which does, I suppose, catch the feeling that all those thousands of Germans had when listening to him. Here's one sentence:

Then his voice grew loud, grew rough, filled the whole space, with something magical and terrible, and the word 'Deutschland' recurred, passionately, every 20 seconds, like a sacred incantation.

Very unquakerly, isn't it? But suppose it was a speech denouncing war, instead of glorifying it. Suppose it was delivered at a pacifist meeting. Could it be delivered in that way? Could we imagine ourselves responding to its eloquence? Uncomfortably? Or not at all? Are Quakers inevitably suspicious of eloquence, or only of the wrong kind of eloquence?

PG:

I notice that my first response to that is as a poet, rather than a Quaker. Laurence and I would very likely agree in our unease with a label, any label—Quaker poet, Christian, Marxist or (these days) environmental—that puts the poetry consciously in the service of a cause or belief. This has nothing to do with the rightness or wrongness of the ideology. 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry'. That's Yeats, he of the dubious politics and frankly cranky spirituality...but I have to agree.

Does this sound like art-for-art's-sake? That does not feel like what I mean. The problem with 'puts the poetry consciously in the service of...' might be not in the cause or belief but in the word 'consciously'. I do think—dare I say it now?—that there is something Quaker in my poetry (and I hope, poetic in my Quakerism too). If there is, it comes from no plan or intention, not from ideas or belief. It will have grown out of Quaker experience, and by 'experience' I mean the human state in which feelings, thoughts, perceptions, appetites, sensations and associations, not to mention the unconscious undercurrents and the all-round weather of the culture we inhabit...all of that is fused.

But this conversation of ours... We are talking with an audience, the readers of *Quaker Studies* journal, a journal with academic standards, so I can't invoke that shifting multi-layered thing 'experience' without trying to articulate it. What does it mean in terms of Quaker thought, Quaker beliefs, Quaker (and I say this as a publicly declared 'non-theist') *theology*?

When I first encountered Quaker meetings, I came, and kept coming, rather in spite of my conscious beliefs, because of a way of being between people that I found not only in Meeting for Worship but in house meetings, shared activities and action, even casual social contacts with Quakers. I am not referring only to the circle, or the silence, when I say that we seemed to sit with each other in a particular way. The way we held the space between us, and what that made possible, was not quite like anything I had known before.

Meeting for Worship was at the heart of it, certainly. The experience of it made me a Quaker long before I thought about it theologically. The principles, the historic culture and beliefs were there implicitly, as they are in a good poem, where the subject might be concrete and specific, here and now, but the resonances spread out wide and deep.

And there I go, using poetry as a simile for that Quaker style of attentiveness, of calm readiness, of listening for what might arise from outside or within. It was not the same as the Buddhist meditation I had also practised, because of the collaborative care and discipline of holding that mutual space. At the heart of writing poetry is that same kind of listening, and what arises might come from someone else's words, or from words you find yourself entertaining, from wherever, or from something not in words at all. The others in the circle with you might be other writers, from hundreds of years or miles away, or your array of partial or imagined selves, in the terms Laurence might use. If nothing arises, you are still involved in shaping, holding and keeping in being a particular resonant space between you and other people. And I have just read back to remind myself whether that sentence set out describing Meeting for Worship or poetry.

That is the level on which, for me, poetry and Quakerism meet. We could explore what it is about Quaker thinking and beliefs that make it that way. The connection, though, is not in the subject matter. You could attend in that way to anything, with an appetite for the unpredictable variousness of what might be presented, and a trust (faith, if you like) in some clearness that will come (but not too soon).

LL:

Quaker worship can be silent; poetry leans totally on language. Philip's latest collection *Deep Field* wrestles with language and silence as he traces his elderly father's descent into deep aphasia. In one poem he writes:

One day you woke to find that you'd lost barley.
Oats. Wheat. Tried each of your five languages
and nothing answered to its name.

You stared through a sixty-year gap in the trees,
past the farmhouse, out into the fields
(all-angled, small, pre-Soviet)

of wordlessness. What you were seeing there
wasn't nothing. *This one...* You tensed
your fingers, upwards. *And this...*

Your fingers tremble-dangled. 'Oats?' *Yes!*
Yes. And that itching-and-scratching
Down the back of your neck:

threshed husks in the shade of the barn. Later
hordeum and triticum came to you, then
some English, some Estonian.

But you'd been back there, in the gone place,
absolutely, with each Ding an sich.
You'd been it, and no words between.

This poem is very moving, as is the whole book. One perhaps needs to know that it's about an old man's growing inability to find words—but of course we can deduce it from the whole book. The fact that his father had known five languages gave him a way to cope with this that more and more failed to work: 'Tried each of your five languages / and nothing answered to its name'.

The world of objects, which used to be controlled by our knowing language, no longer obeys: 'answering to one's name' is what human beings do, and now objects are like naughty children, they won't do what they're supposed to. He can remember his childhood as pictures, but can't find the names. The poem gropes, as his father was groping, then finds a word, 'Oats'—in quotes, because it's a word he finds, or perhaps it's supplied by Philip, helping him. What he can find is the physical sensation of remembering, then words (absurdly learned) come to him, but what's really important is that he'd felt his way back into the physical sensation of remembering his childhood. The 'Ding an sich' (the thing in itself) is a philosophical idea (from Kant) but it's a bit absurd to call it philosophical, since it's actually something much more basic, something that precedes language (and therefore can be grasped at by something who's losing language).

In its leaning on language, poetry can only be written by someone with a feel for the power of words, yet paradoxically it's an attempt to shake free of words and find the 'thisness' of experience, the underlying actuality that words are a way of capturing. How obvious it now seems to find that losing language is a way of groping one's way directly into experience. Obvious? What a poem finds for us is something we'd never have thought of if we hadn't been shown it, and that once we're shown it we're led to say 'But of course'. Language seems to get on perfectly well for everyday purposes, so that we use it without thinking about it, then along comes the poet and points out something so obvious and something we'd never have thought of for ourselves. Of course we can go on using language perfectly competently if we never read a poem, but once we've been shown the poem's truth we ask: How did I ever fail to see that, and to see how important it is?

What has this to do with Quakerism? The answer is, nothing and everything. No one is arrogant enough to think that only Quakers can appreciate poetry, nor to think that because you are a Quaker you must be a poet. Lots of Quakers write verses, but most of them don't offer these wonderful revelations into the nature of experience. Verse does no one any harm, but it's not poetry. So if we hope that there's a kind of parallel between Quakerism and poetry, it's not because being a Quaker gives you a kind of direct access to being a poet. Easy to say what it's not: much harder to say what the parallel actually is. Humility in front of experience: that's the closest I can come.

May I now turn from Philip to myself? I do this with hesitation, since I don't much like talking about my own poems, but this seems the moment to say that I have only one poem which came to me in a Quaker meeting. (I say 'came to me', though it needed a lot of work afterwards.) The poem is called *Flesh*.

I write these lines in praise of my home,
Which is flesh.
I am a permanent inhabitant;
Have never lived anywhere else.

I bite on apples: the stiff crunch, my teeth
Slicing the tangible damp tissues,
The world's flesh.
I eat this world: nothing else nourishes.

I dive in lakes: the slap, the tear of foam,
The stiff support of water under the arms,
The rub of flesh.
Naked, I wear the world's body.

If I worry and grow thin, flesh shrinks.
If stouter, here is only flesh to grow.
My bones
Wear nothing else. I'd be lost without it.

But now, here, in this ragged garden,
Among the hum and swell, the continuings,
Suddenly the blue
And faceless gaps between the trees

Are where I long to be, outside
Of this endless becoming, this buzz,
This warm incipient rot.

There is someone I cannot touch;
Somewhere I am banished from.
Some act of cruelty locked me in.

The Meeting was in Canada, in about 1977. The young woman who ministered was in some distress, not I think about anything in particular, but about the way she seemed cut off from the world: she actually left the Meeting in tears, and though I spoke to her afterwards I never found out who she was, and she has never seen the poem. The poem came out much less distressed than she was, but it owes to her the feeling that what gives us our consciousness of belonging in the world is both what makes us feel at home and in some sense cuts us off—though what it cuts us off from I don't know. It's both a religious and an irreligious poem. And though it has no resemblance to Philip's poem there is a sense in which it seems to be on the same subject.

PG:

Now, here's a specimen moment for the study of the self and selves... It never occurred to me, reading *Flesh*, that it was the report of someone else's experience. And of course it is not, in the sense that listening to and being touched by someone else's words (and the failure of words) became part of the writer's own experience. You might call this empathy or imagination—two terms that point to fruitful human mysteries. I would add in a term like *resonance*, where something

outside connects to a feeling the writer contains, somewhere in the cloud of possibilities, but maybe unformed and unarticulated yet... and *extrapolation*, where that seed of connection grows, is 'cultured', in the fertile medium of poetry.

Whatever the unknown woman's original distress, the poem contains it, offering it the chance to make more sense. Isn't that what a gathered Meeting for Worship can do? A spiky ministry does not have to be agreed or disagreed with or a compromise reached; the distress in it does not have to be explained or salved, simply *held*. It certainly does not have to be moralised, in the way that conventional religious verse (and, let's be honest, clichéd ministry) can do. This moving, thoughtful poem listens, with a sympathetic attention that also gives some balance. Through the medium of the writer's attention 'the slap, the tear of foam, / The stiff support of water' becomes as real as that final yearning out into...what?

It is tempting (though too easy a lit-crit reflex, maybe) to compare those 'blue / and faceless gaps' to another famous shift into a place beyond the power of words to define. (The power to invoke, evoke, of course is another matter. We need to remember this distinction when we say something is 'beyond words'.) I am thinking about Philip Larkin's:

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
 The sun-comprehending glass,
 And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
 Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.
 (from: *High Windows*)

I have never been sure what Larkin wants us to get from that breath-taking moment. I rather value the fact that I do not know, and he does not tell us. These lines come at the end of a seemingly opinionated poem; Larkin has been playing his grumpy old persona, grumbling enviously at the sexual freedom of the young, coming close to saying '*twas ever thus*...when suddenly we step into this place of almost vertiginous openness, beyond agreement, disagreement or a sense of particular self.

It interests me that we need negative terms—faceless, endless, nowhere—to indicate the wider spaces that contain our partial experience. (Dare I mention *via negativa*?) Buddhism gave me clues to that, before I was a Quaker—how what we translate as 'the void' might be the generative force of life. Not that I want to hustle this poem of Laurence's into religious language. There is no need to see it happening in a Quaker meeting more than any other room and garden. In fact, to make theology out of the poem *Flesh* would lead to something I suspect might repel us both—a Manichean picture of separate worlds of flesh and spirit, with the former as the house of exile. As a writer and reader of poetry I never take the 'message' of a poem to be absolute, however wise it sounds.

And isn't that the problem with theology, most politics, much psychology—in fact theory of all kinds that aim to encompass the world? (Has anyone tried to work their way through the catalogue of Christian heresies and doctrines, tracing each to a point where one or other perfectly familiar and natural human response

gets turned in to an absolute principle?) Laurence's poem catches one facet, or rather, two, in balance for a moment, on the point of tipping. It does not have to be the only possible, or right, response. The point is that it is heard, and is held.

Quaker Meeting for Worship has built in to it a capacious and faceted sense of the truth. Anyone might minister, and someone else might minister later...not in disagreement but with a clear difference. The sense of the meeting, though, is something else, comprising both and others, and the many things unsaid between them; it is simply *larger* than what any one of us might put in words. This can be especially striking in Meetings for Worship for Business, when all everyday experience says that logical argument, persuasion and of course finally voting is the only way. Among Friends, I have heard it nicely argued that the spirit *needs* us to be different, even at odds, in our reactions, so that out of and between the whole array of facets some truth can emerge.

And likewise with poetry... The limitation Laurence rightly spots with overtly religious verse is that it feels compelled to agree with itself. To be consistent. Whereas poetry hopes to be capacious, as in the Yeats quote above, or Walt Whitman's 'I contain multitudes.' And that, of course, means the poem, the state of poetry, not the poet's ego, his or her everyday walk-around-in self.

I believe that a good reader helps to co-create a poem, so I turned to Laurence's reading of my poem about my father's loss of 'barley' with anticipation, maybe a little apprehension. What would it become, in his hands?

He is right to point out that this poem is one in a book—in fact, one section in a long sequence that makes up most of that book, The sequence is called Something Like The Sea, and the sea in question is many things—not just the actual ocean of the north Cornish coast and the Baltic Sea my father crossed as an exile fleeing for his life, but the fluid shifting stuff of language, memory and selfhood. Near the end, it comes to this:

John, you are the sea

I stare into, until my eyes maze, flicker-bits
of sunlight running hither and from
without moving—any single point
as steady maybe as a lighthouse's one-
pointed name for itself, but who
could know? From here, it's jizzle and slur,
our particles (reshuffled slightly
to make up a you, me or anyone)
scarcely material, our quanta, to, fro:
AC pulses in the mains, the veins, of history.
World without end. As it were.

The moment when my father loses words for barley is just one of those flickers on the surface—and it is one of the more benign moments, too, from early in the process of disintegration of my father's language. It became harder, later, to hold

on to the hope that he might be there, somehow whole, in a world of pure sensation beyond the reach of words. This is a question for our times—both philosophical and on our doorsteps, in our homes, as medical science finds ways to keep our bodies working longer; Alzheimer's is only one, if the best known, of the ways in which many of us will lose ourselves or lose our loved ones, if that is indeed what losing one's memories, one's words, one's account of oneself, entails.

In later sections it grew harder to see the crumbling language as a pane of glass going opaque between us, leaving each of us intact on either side. I began to see it more as the surface formed between two fluids, but the person beyond that film of surface tension was changing, being changed by its changing. You only have to follow the logic of that metaphor to realize that cuts both ways; I was being changed by the breakdown in the medium that joined us, too.

This is a frightening thought in itself, its implications more so. At this point one religious response would be to appeal to God and to a notion of the soul. Maybe the nowhere that is beyond the trees, the faceless blue in Laurence's poem really could be somewhere, and I might be someone, something, there. I feel this...and I don't believe it. Rather, a Buddhist image of a raindrop falling into water comes to me. For sheer size, that body of water has to be the ocean. In recent years I have been writing on the edge of, and about, the Severn estuary, but always with the sense that it opens out into the Atlantic, which I know from Cornish days. That ocean is no easy comfort; it is as frightening as it is soothing, it can kill as well as calm, and yet...

Another section remembers the day in my childhood when my father and I, out swimming, were swept out by the undertow. He managed to shout the one word which saved me—'float'. Trying to put my foot down could have killed me. Trusting the water to hold me meant it washed me back to shore.

I am not going to burden that true story with a moralizing meaning. I am not going to equate God with the sea. Still, he (or she, or it, or whatever process or deeply human experience the word 'God' points to) might be 'something like' it. That's not my opinions speaking, still less my theology. It is what I seem to be hearing in the act of listening to language and experience (Laurence says *humility in front of it*) that we call poetry.

To listen, not instruct the reader... That is a curious thing to hear myself saying, as a teacher of writing, speaking to a senior retired academic. I wonder now if 'teacher' would be another of what Laurence sees as his separate selves.

LL:

I have always been an academic—that is to say I have earned my living by teaching English literature in universities. I decided very early on that I must keep the poet and the academic as separate as possible. I was helped in this by the fact that I never felt that the emphasis on being a unified self which is so widespread among Friends applied to me: I have always felt I wasn't unified, that the bits of me didn't fit together to make a whole. I say this, but of course none of us is really able to understand himself: there are too many ways in which we don't understand ourselves.

PG:

By a process of serendipity—somewhere between chance and what you might describe in Quaker terms as ‘leading’—I too find myself teaching in a university. Yes, we are both Professors...and just saying that word in a Quaker context must remind us of the scorn in George Fox’s use, in his *Journal*, of that term.

Not that I saw myself as setting out on a teaching career, or indeed would have volunteered until recently to wear the label ‘academic’. Some people would dispute that I am that even now, since my subject is Creative Writing, a discipline still working to establish its seriousness and rigour in the academic world. This does not worry me unduly; my teaching and research grow naturally from my own work as a writer, so the separation that Laurence describes has never seemed an issue.

Not that there aren’t dangers. Some writers worry that teaching gives away a kind of energy, or even ideas, they should be keeping to themselves. That isn’t my fear. My experience has always been that new ideas come through collaboration, and educating in a field like this is like collaboration. One of its lessons is that letting go of one’s grip on ownership of ideas lets new and more surprising ones occur.

I do have caution about theory. I am not anti-intellectual; I believe in thinking, being thoughtful, being clear and self-aware of how I think. I do sense a danger for the writer in transferring too much of the process, too soon, into the sphere of logical thought, in terms geared up to defend themselves in argument. For me this risks disenfranchising great areas of the brain, not to mention the skin and other sense organs, the wordless tingle of hormones and the general process of not-knowing-ness which come together with the conscious to produce surprising wholes. If creativity is an equation, it is the kind of algebra that works with unknowns, even irrational numbers; if mathematics can encompass this, then so can poetry.

Quaker Meeting for Worship is as much to do with listening as speaking — listening not just to other people but to things not literally heard. When I say that, I could equally be describing writing.

But the separating-out of selves... I have already said that I see meeting as a wider wholeness that needs our disparities to contribute to its process. It is an easy step to sense that happening inside the individual person, too.

A vision of the self that cannot tolerate uncertainties and conflicts, one that is unable to accept you may have feelings of which you do not approve, would be seen, at least by most humanistic and psychodynamic psychologies, as rigid and brittle. This includes the ability to feel the inner sense of some positions that you might find downright evil. Laurence mentions of my long-ago disapproval of his poem in a Nazi persona. I’m not sure my response was that simple. Without quite being able to recall the poem, it sounds to me now a good case of the way the writer-consciousness can ‘hold’ a disturbing voice to be heard, in order better to understand what drives it.

Around the same time as that workshop, I remember that I wrote a poem very close to the edge of what I could stomach seeing on the page in front of me. It

spoke in a child-abuser's persona, from inside his insidiously distanced and romanticized take on the situation. It was never published, not because of the content but because it never worked *as a poem*. It was always a fantasy about another fantasy, mine about his, and never yielded that sudden and unasked-for sense of clarifying something I'd not grasped before.

We are all familiar with the outcry there can be against works of art that give an insight into motives of a terrorist or criminal. A lot of people seriously feel that to understand is to condone. The reasons I do not agree with that are very close to what makes me a Quaker...and a writer, too.

LL:

There is one way in which the way I felt as an academic also fitted the disunity I'm referring to. So much of English poetry—and so much of the best—is religious. How could I so value the poetry of Donne, Milton, Hopkins, R.S. Thomas and many others if I don't believe what they are saying? Clearly I have to distinguish between the question of whether what the poems are telling us is true, and the way in which the poems convey the poet's experience. This is often said (that you may disagree with what the poem is maintaining, and still find it a beautiful poem) and I'm sure it's true. So when Donne, terrified at the thought of the day of judgment, begins a poem 'What if this present were the world's last night', I can feel and be moved by his terror, though I don't believe there's a day of judgment. I often talked about this with my students, if we were reading religious poetry together. What I didn't talk to them about, because I didn't think I should impose my other self on them, was the way I would wrestle with this when writing myself.

But I can talk about it now, and I will do so by quoting a poem. I wrote a book called *Chapter and Verse*, which retold a lot of Bible stories. That was of course a kind of test of my belief that poetry and religious faith are distinct from each other, though there are all sorts of links between them. Lots of poems in the volume could illustrate this—for instance:

The Punishment

To come back sometimes, that is all I ask.
 To smooth the soil, to count the roses, dip
 My fingers in the stream, see if the beasts
 Still know me, and to recollect the names
 That Adam gave them (Do they live there still?
 They must, they must)
 —Even to go back once,
 To bear my first child there, hearing the leaves,
 To lie exhausted on familiar grass,
 Wait for the cool of evening when he walks
 Among the trees: then I would call him over,
 And hold the baby in my tired arms,
 And say, God bless it.
 That is all I ask.

Adam explained, explained: 'We can't go back.
That is our punishment.'

 But even if
I'm not allowed to touch, just to be there,
To smell the grass, the damp, the honeysuckle,
The rain—

 And if I'm not allowed to smell,
To see the shades of green, the yellowing leaves
Curl in the sun,

 —Even to shut my eyes
And hear it all continue, hear the hum,
The growl of life -

Adam explained again: 'There's nothing there'.

There must be, Adam. They were innocent,
The creatures. Creeping, lying, running,
Dependent on each other and the sun,
Not needing us, not hurt by us, not us.
It can't be, can't be. God is just. And even—
Even if not, if God is selfish, till
He walked there in the evening, he loved that,
He'd keep it for his pleasure—
 'God? He'll manage.'

What can I dream of, Adam, if not that?
To wake and find you there, the fruit uneaten,
The four streams flowing to an unknown world,
The creatures friendly, and the snake with legs:
What else? What else?

Dreaming is still allowed.
Perhaps he can't prevent us. Now it's gone,
Now nothing's there, all dreams are possible.

PG:

I must have been one of those students to whom Laurence did not talk about his own work as a writer. I am glad he feels free of that scruple now. I can see nothing but gain for a student of literature in getting a first-hand view of the choices faced by any writer. Maybe Laurence felt that his authority was such that the students would have felt obliged to agree with his personal answers to those universal choices. As one of them, forty years ago, I can pretty much guarantee I would not have. (Maybe I'd have felt obliged to disagree; it was 1970, after all...)

I am moved by Laurence's account of Eden, neither because of the myth nor even because of the *beauty* of the poem...unless beauty *is* the ability to jolt the reader into recognition that the experience described is there inside them, too. (So truth *is* beauty, after all...) The yearning for Eden, the longing to step back into simplicity, is surely available to every one of us. And isn't there a spark that passes both ways between this poem and *Flesh*—in both, the metaphorical (and actual) sounds of living, the buzz, the growl, the *hum*?

As for *believing in* a day of judgment or Garden of Eden, I find myself wondering at the many layers of just what, in any account of anything, we do 'believe'. I believe that I am listening to a woman's voice in the poem, at the same time as I know that Laurence wrote it. I know all kinds of things about the likely weaving of those biblical texts through history, but I can see the Garden.

In a similar way, I believe Donne's terror. I can find a shade of something like it in myself, as a child of the age of the nuclear threat... not to mention as a man of sixty suddenly aware of what the chances—no, the likeliness—of illness, and the certainty of death. I don't have to share his theology. Of course I do not feel precisely what Donne felt. I can comprehend the way that religious belief was woven into the fabric of every person's being in his world, but I cannot un-think the experience of the centuries since then. I can find parallels, if small ones, and extrapolate; I can test my guessed imaginations out against Donne's poems, to see if I'm getting closer. In other words, I do what anybody does when they communicate.

When I listen to ministry in a Quaker meeting, the process is the same. Sometime I can't know quite where (to use the common phrase) they're *coming from*. We have to trust. In writing groups, particularly ones where some creative collaboration happens, I sometimes mention Quaker meetings; we can't know, I'll say, how the words that might seem clumsy and partial to us might touch another person in the room. Their loose-endedness might be just what someone else needs to spark an insight. This sort of listening is intensified, made more resonant, by agreeing that we are all listening together, for the spirit of the meeting or, as some of us would say, that of God.

LL:

May we talk for a little about the balance of humour and seriousness in poetry? I am looking at a poem of yours, *English as a Foreign Language*, from a much earlier book, *Cat's Whisker*. I suspect Philip may not be very keen on this choice of poem. It is a comic poem, and he does not usually write those. I can see that it might seem to him too obvious, and it comes from a book that is twenty five years old. What does a poet think of the work he wrote so long ago? And does it make a big difference if he's now writing differently and better? Or indeed if, like me, he is no longer writing poetry?

PG:

Ah, it's so easy to live in a personal myth that sees one's whole past as leading necessarily to here and now, this 'me'... This is natural, the easiest way to a feeling of wholeness and sense, and also a way to avoid unfruitful feelings of regret. Poets are sometimes prone to go back and adjust the past to help that myth along. But I am happy (Happy? Well, at least content, if sometimes embarrassed) to say that all the people I have ever been are equal in the eyes of God. And the poems, of course, have left home and gone into the world to make lives of their own.

I am moved and just a little challenged to hear Laurence saying that he no longer writes. That is different from saying he is no longer a poet, of course. It is a poet's judgment that what he might be writing now, in his eighties, would not meet the standards by which he has led his writing life. Would I be brave enough to say that, with such good grace? Being alongside my father's stoicism in his last years made me realize we all need to do something similar, about some of our capacities, at some stages of our lives. Yes, I know we have Dylan Thomas's much-quoted 'rage, rage, against the dying of the light'. But isn't that a middle-aged man's poem, more about his apprehensions than about the father, who says nothing 'there on that sad height'? It makes me uneasy to say this, but I know where he's coming from. He cannot accept that his father might have moved to somewhere that he cannot understand.

But my poem, as Laurence requests...

English as a Foreign Language

'Dear Sir, You will not know me but I wish you to.
I study English two years. How I wish for some one
I may correspond to. Mother says this might
to be misunderstood. I know in others tongue
are so many things I may not say. But I shall use
a dictionary. Why should not peoples to each other write?

Here see my photograph. The Upper School Work Unit
at the Heroes of October State Farm. Last left at back
besides the many potatoes, he in the spectacle is me.
I am not strong in sport. And some time I am sad
for the brothers and sisters I have not. I am unique.
I keep old things, as stamps. I save small countries

that are not now. (May I cut off your Queen's head
if you write?) Also I have Grandfather's red and white
chess men though I play not, a boar's tusk, a accordion,
a bullet from the Patriotic War, a piece of meteorite
that Father sent me (my best treasure) from Siberia.
He labours in important projects, and is long gone.

Please write, if it is permitted. Tell me of your
own self. And please teach me a good idiom to startle
my teachers. For I confess, my grades are poor.
I could not live in English. You can say too many little
different things. Here it is simpler. Where you have four
or five words, some time we have none at all.'

LL:

I think this poem is delightful. It is worth saying that a poet's view of language has something in common with that of a foreigner: both notice, and implicitly question, idioms that most of us take for granted. It is perfectly logical to want 'someone I may correspond to', but the poor Russian lad (I assume he's Russian) doesn't realise that this has quite a different meaning from what he means.

Similarly with ‘things I may not say’. We take our own language for granted, but the poet and the foreigner are two examples of those who don’t. ‘May I cut off your Queens’ head’ is another and more drastic example.

He must be Russian, mustn’t he, because his father was in Siberia? At this point the poem gets serious. ‘He labours in important projects, and is long gone’. Is this young man naive or cautious? Does he think being sent to Siberia is what happens to fathers, or is he afraid that the authorities may see his letter? Which is worse? We realise that the writer is not very bright (‘I confess, my grades are poor’) and he ‘could not live in English’ (an expression to turn round and round in our heads).

I suppose it has something in common with my poem *The Merman*, though there is nothing comic in mine. Not fair to put the two together, really. Yet I can see, in this poem, traces of the same writer who wrote those wonderful poems about his father, who also had no control over the English language, and of whom Philip wrote so movingly:

Ninety now, you’re adrift on the vowel-stream,
The crisp edge of all your five languages gone

and we’re back to the least of languages...

What is a poet? Someone who can take us ‘back to the least of language’—and show that least is most, that loss reveals what normality sometimes cannot.

PG:

I was hoping we would come to Laurence’s *The Merman*, a poem I have loved for some time. But first... My learner-English-speaker is not quite as obvious as he might seem. He could indeed be Russian, but Estonians were also transported to the labour camps in tens of thousands. My own grandfather died, the surviving family was off-handedly informed years afterwards, somewhere in a mining camp in the Urals. So this apparently comic turn is close to my father’s story after all. Occupied people in Soviet times did indeed learn to write letters in code, but this lad (modeled slightly on a distant member of the family) does not yet have the command of language to conceal the truth. He might not even know, or accept that he knows, the truth, but still it seeps out through the cracks in language. The Freudian slip has become a cliché of our time, but for someone who hopes to master words, it is a sobering thought that sometimes our mistakes and failures testify, in ways we would not dare, to what is true.

Laurence’s merman, of course, also has his being in the sea, the medium that flows through *Deep Field* and my father’s story too.

It was because I swam into their net
Because the net was there
The water thickened, there was no way out,
It was because it tangled in my hair
Because it caught the water it caught me,
I left the wet and came to live in air.

I learned to stand on two legs in the dry.
 I learned to look at day, at brown and red
 Till they went dark. And then I learned to die
 And wake when dark was dead.
 I learned to change the place I was, with legs.
 Learnt to drink air, but never learnt their talk.

They gave me hungry needing fish to eat
 And called it 'fish'.
 Then after needing nothing fish to put
 And called it 'fish'. Fish, fish; as if the same.
 That same, that difference, they call that a name.
 I couldn't talk like that. I couldn't talk.

When humans talk they split their say in bits
 And bit by bit they step on what they feel.
 They talk in bits, they never talk in all.
 So live in wetness swimming they call 'sea';
 And stand on dry and watch the wet waves call
 They still call 'sea'.
 Only their waves don't call.

Strange are their pleasures, living in the dry.
 Build a long finger on an empty house
 And in it sing, four times a moon, and kneel,
 And talk sea talk at last, talk what they feel
 Not words, not names. I heard their holy song
 It said belong, belong.

So one day in the finger house I stood
 And sang of wet and swimming in the was,
 And happy sang of happy singing till
 They all came running noise and sticks of wood
 And shouting devil kneel
 And devil and that day I found out hurt.

That dark I did not die but ran away
 To where the wet and swimming call and wait
 And joined myself to swimming. This was back,
 It did not hurt to change the way you lay,
 It did not hurt to breathe. Just swallowing hurt
 At first, till water washed the words out. Yet

I must have tasted too much dry up there
 I must have got a taste for words, or air,
 Or hurt, or something. Now
 I follow ships from far,
 I climb on rocks and sit there till they see,
 Till they put off in boats to bring me words
 And nets, and hurt. Wait till they're close and then
 Almost reluctant, slip back in the sea.

The merman in Laurence's poem is a displaced person. His provenance, I think, is in legend rather than myth; he is or is like the merman of Orford Ness, who appears in early folk versions as a feral 'wild man' found tangled in a fisherman's net, and in later tellings becomes firmly a merman. So he is not the more sinister amoral selkie of Atlantic stories, or indeed a mermaid...though his final appearance in the poem, appearing to sailors, almost 'leading them on' before disappearing, merges with the mermaid image in a haunting and uneasy way. What most of these stories seem to share is a wistfulness of dispossession, of the impossibility of really residing in both elements—or even happily in either, once you know there is a choice.

Put like that, we are in another story of the fall from grace. Eve yearns for the undivided, un-exiled absorption in the life of the Garden. This merman's story is not one of a transgression, but of being transgressed; he literally gets entangled in our world, and at the end, poignantly, remains so even after his escape. Is the woman speaking in Laurence's poem *Flesh* also longing to return from exile in this world?

But most specifically, the merman's painful landfall is into human language. He could have lived with the air and the hard surfaces, you feel, but it's the language that gets inside his soul.

What dry-land language does is separate. It abstracts. The merman's almost dissolves on the page. His sentences flow into each other. He has trouble with nouns; his telling 'mistakes' are often to replace a noun with an adjective or some state of the verb. It makes no sense to him that a thing can have the same name on two occasions when your whole relationship is different. Naming the world with nouns (which, remember, is what Adam did, nothing to do with Eve and the fruit of the tree of knowledge) makes it disparate—'When humans talk they split their say in bits'—but also open to be operated on, controlled. His way of knowing is from intimate contact with the fluid stuff of his life, indivisible.

Should I say in passing that the way my father's language left him was first in proper nouns, then nouns in general; later, adjectives and verbs? Curiously, the last elements to go were the conjunctions and small idiomatic gesture—phrases like 'you know'—with no meaning in themselves, but all about connection, between elements in the sentence, between the speaker and the listener.

Whether it is possible to 'talk in all', in any sense we mean by 'talk', is a question at the root of language. We never find out whether this merman talks at ease with other merfolk. If he can we maybe could not hear it; in the poem we only see him as an isolated individual, on the border between worlds. But we do see he has a brush against something like his way of knowing in the singing in the church. It is not the theology or meaning of the hymns but the singing that speaks to him, with its seamlessness and physicality, the emotion that surges through it irrespective of the words.

Now I ask myself: are we poets because we want to find that seamlessness in—or do I mean between—human words? Because we sense ourselves as living already in two or more worlds? To say that I come of mixed Estonian and

Cornish heritage, with traces of Anglo-Indian and arguably Viking somewhere, might hint that my sense of displacement has traceable roots.

LL:

Our backgrounds are more similar than we perhaps realised—half very foreign and half very English. My father's family came from the Ukraine, and he was actually born in Zhitomir, though brought to London when 6 months old—and then taken some years later to the Cape, where I was eventually born. My mother was totally English and non-Jewish, born in a village in Surrey, then went out to the Cape with her brother, who had fought in the Boer War, when she was about 17.

PG:

And my Indian-born grandfather was a military policeman in the then Rhodesia before coming to Europe to serve (in fact, to be an early airman) in the 1914–18 war. So the tides of history wash us about. But we are not exceptionally interesting hybrids; this is the state of human ancestry, ever since one or more groups of early humans walked out of Africa. It is more visibly so than ever in an age of globalization and migration. Human life on earth is explained less by roots than by routes.

A few years ago I wrote a novel called *The Lastling*, whose thought-experiment was to imagine that our stories of the yeti (another wild-man legend) might refer to a very few surviving Neanderthals. We know from their bones that Neanderthal brains were as large as ours, though configured differently, and maybe had no or much less use for vocal speech. Here is Tahr, a young Buddhist monk, trying to converse with the young female *yeh-teh* who is managing to convey something to him without speech.

...the small fire in the cave of her eyes was flickering again. Tahr saw something he couldn't make out—an abstract shape of white and grey—and as if she saw his trouble with it she was miming, almost moulding something out of air. Something to do with *high*, with *climbing*...then a narrow place, something narrowing in...and something hiding deep down in it, something cold to touch...

Snow. He'd had the picture in his mind, but hadn't grasped it. Now he knew what he'd seen. It was one of those small deep gullies you sometimes found in the rocks, so high up and so much in shadow that it could hide a tongue of last year's snow—grey, gritty and pockmarked, dripping slightly round the edges. Only when you touched it did you realise that it was a tiny bit of winter—not just last year's but maybe years and years before—maybe all the winters, right back to the times when snows had covered half the world. *Geng-sun*, that was what Shengo called it. *Snow-surviving*.

And what had the white people said about the *yeh-teh*—that they might be a few, a very few, of an ancient tribe—survivors from the Age of Ice?

Geng-sun. Tahr couldn't quite hold the picture in the mind. It was the melting he saw—melting yet surviving, surviving yet steadily melting—and he wondered if that was how the whole world looked to *Geng-sun*: not so much *things* as things

happening. No wonder names were a problem. *Geng-sun*. She might not need the word, but as he formed it in his mind, he saw the melting-surviving more clearly, he felt its toughness...and its sadness too. He pointed to her, and said the word aloud.

She thinks, I realized afterwards, imagistically, sensually, holistically—not without intelligence but...well, like poetry. Could that be how the mer-people think and converse? Paradoxically, this seems to me to have something to do with Quaker silences, though it seems a universe away from the sparse and plain declarative speaking practiced by Friends.

I would like to think this state was where my father was living in his final weeks, but I know that is romantic. Successive small strokes and advancing vascular dementia were disconnecting and scattering his being as fast as his immediate sensations could connect. Still, on the way he gave me the strongest sense I have ever had of the sheer physical reality of the human voice, and the amount of emotion and spirit conveyed by pure vowel sounds when word and even consonants were gone. The poems found themselves describing this flux of language, or the currents that flow under the language of words, in terms that Laurence's merman might have recognized as 'something like the sea'.

Let us end at a beginning—the poem from Laurence's *Chapter and Verse* that retells the opening of Genesis, coupled with the first lines of John.

In the Beginning

A scratch, a tear, a flicker, flutter, stab...
 Something...
 Slowly among
 Our rearrangings, in the long
 And random motions we had always had,
 There was disturbance.
 There was occurrence, was
 We didn't have the word.
 Order was being made.
 We had no words for order yet, but knew
 Our to-and-fro was ending.
 We wanted to enjoy the rights of matter—
 Not to exist yet; to be left alone
 Random, incessant and insentient.
 But we were learning words:
 Could say, 'It's dark';
 Could know we liked the dark.
 Then we were gathered, shot apart, and then
 The new word came: we trembled and took fright.
 Prehistory was over.
 It was the death of Nature,
 Hearing that ultimatum, that last word,
 Let there be light.

Tell the story of that poem backwards, and we are back in that flux, that oceanic state without shores or sureties, without definitions. If this is nothing, then it is a positive, dynamic Nothing, as when Buddhists talk about the Void. It might also be the human state before birth, before language. This much we might recognise, from our psychology and maybe from our own experience in meditation or deep worship.

More surprising is what brings it to an end—not only the word, but that most positive word for Quakers: light. But this is a poem; it is made of words; we read it in the light. And isn't that the point—that we reach into silence sometimes, sometimes into poetry, when we're drawn to do the thing that maybe cannot be humanly done, though we can get a little closer: 'talk in all'?

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