

TO HELL WITH ALL MATURE, QUIET, PATIENT POETRY

an essay by

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I

It seems to me that certain Irish poets subscribe to a Credo that goes like this: I believe I should write poetry as though I were on some special kind of drug that gives me tremendous insight but also keeps me well-disposed towards reality (hash would do, perhaps); I believe that all experiences must be situated in a narrative, preferably in one of the past tenses; I believe that ordinary things are more important than extraordinary things; I believe that meaning is essentially positive; I believe that poetry must be immediately accessible.



It is as though they have taken to heart Borges' remark that intelligence is economical and orderly, and a miracle strikes it as a bad habit. It leads to poems of the following kind:

I met a man years ago
Who practised a now dead trade
Which was quite common then.
He used to do something unique to his trade
Which demonstrated his skill.
This unique skilfulness
Is also in some way related to writing.
Join with me in feeling good about this.

Or:

I remember how you used to do something
And I've been thinking a lot about it.

It exemplified some aspect of your character

Or your situation.

Now when I watch other people

I sometimes see them doing something similar

And it reminds me of you.

Join with me in wondering

Whether your character or your situation

Might actually have been universal.

Or:

My mother/ father used to do something/had some peculiarity.

So does my son/ daughter.

Join with me in thinking

This is an indicator that some kind of perfection

Exists in the world.

Or:

You are amazing

In some way.

The fact that I find this amazing

Proves that I love you.

This is how we do things

When you are doing

Your amazing thing.

Join with me in thinking

That when we do things this way

It is amazing.

The possible variations are limited enough. For 'man who practised a now dead trade' substitute 'painter', 'poet', 'philosopher', 'composer', for example. Or substitute 'lover' and it becomes a poem about sex: 'I slept with a man/woman who used to do something uniquely skilful in his/her lovemaking...' Or change the tenses: 'You used to be amazing... when we did things in this way it was amazing.' The rubric admits of no indicator of inten-

sity in the language, no overt emotional charge, no declarations, except perhaps in the last line or two. It creates mature, quiet, patient poetry. All sorts of metaphors are used to describe it. Zen crops up a lot, archaeology, meditation, prayer, cameo, redemption, etc. This last is a given – nobody likes to say that ‘redemption’ is the business of the unredeemed: readers expect poems to be feel-goody.

The language is flat, undifferentiated, yellow-pack. The even, solitary voice is interchangeable across numerous poets. The syntax is straightforward. The subject matter is generic. Allusion is mainly confined to titles. Borrowing is rare. There is very little ego. Elegy rules OK. If a starting point is required by the neophyte poet, the workshop chants: Start with memory. The past is the perfect tense.

These potted narratives, suitably expanded, could become equally generic short stories. In fact many poems read like *précises* of stories. They all work inexorably towards an epiphany, and, with all due respect to Joyce, the term was never intended to be anything other than a trope for what everybody has always expected from literature anyway – insight.

We want to tell stories. We are entitled to tell stories, as poets have done in the past (although, of course, no one would attempt an epic nowadays). But fiction has long ago taken up the task. Fiction tells tales and epics very effectively, and can be much more responsive to changing realities than poetry. Maybe we resent this interloper. Maybe we are all fiction-writers *manqué*. Maybe we’re just lazy. It is certainly not to our advantage to allow poetry to become a kind of fiction for people with short attention spans.

II

I have written many such poems. I am disappointed in myself for writing them, or at least for publishing them. The following, from the title sequence of *Mathematics & Other Poems*, is an egregious example:

The Daunt lightship, pitching at her station,
the cold loom of light on a whale-black tide.

Great-grandfather Brice in his merchantman's
serge noting the state of the sea, marking time,
reading the glass, pacing the planks from
gunwale to gunwale. The edge of his world
was the surf-line of winking lights on shore -
the secular world of the keeper of light.

By complex approximations range
& clarity is achieved. Light is a thing
that there are no absolutes in:- Aragand
lamp, dioptric lens - though the language of light
is symbolic the practice is ordinary
& Newton's ghost walks through it.

The dead trade (there are no more lightships); the skill ('reading the glass'); the analogy with the trade of writing ('complex approximations', 'range and clarity', etc.). My ancestor was the keeper of the light: I too am a keeper of light in my own way. The last line is particularly vacuous. This kind of writing is wasteful, trite, disengaged. It's as if the world no longer exists. War, corruption, global warming, famine, globalization, neo-liberalism, etc. Forget it? Stick to the past. The language is steady, undemanding (the technical terms are in parenthesis so the reader can discard them), solid. The ghost of the sonnet form has its knee bent to tradition. This is a useless poem.

III

What great Irish poet is now engaged with the political, philosophical or sociological questions of the day? Who is our Coleridge?

Quietism rules on Parnassus.

The critic believes that a poet has matured when he or she has rejected any attempt to startle. Poems must be workmanlike – meaning steady, careful, thorough, predictable.

Workmanship has a clear value. We are to concentrate on whatever is well-made and leave the singing till later. In fact it may never become necessary to sing at all. This tells us a great deal about the people who write criticism, but is not otherwise helpful.

Critics mainly confirm us in our affiliations. They too lack a word from above, though who the god of critics might be is anybody's guess.

Academics are never happy with miracles because they are always discovered by someone else. The best most academics can hope for is that they will be able to recognize at an early stage the person who recognized the miracle. That they will be able to join the right school before enrolment ends.

What of readers?

I regret to say that it is not possible to believe in the objective reality of an audience. No two writers have the same audience, yet the same people buy everybody's books. This was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof. The term 'reader' or 'audience' refers to a creature of the writer's imagination. In fact, I suspect, this sacred function of the artist is in the process of being arrogated by the marketing departments of publishing houses, by radio chat-shows and newspaper columnists. We cannot look to our 'readers' for inspiration, because to do so is no more than to look inwards, and to judge by our output, this strategy has already failed us.

Nevertheless, when the miracle occurs we will be astonished to see that there already exists a literary context, a body of criticism, a readership to whom the event appeals.

I cannot help feeling that we are living in the decay of some great movement, a kind of twenty-first century Edwardianism. It is no use to look to our immediate elders for exponents of the greatness from which we are falling away. Heaney, for example, is himself a member of the neo-Edwardian club, maybe a founding member (I remember how my father used to dig spuds in a certain way and this is related to writing; I remember how my mother used to fold sheets; Once upon a time I went out for a walk by a lake, etc). Others too.

At the present moment it may not be possible to nominate the movement of which we are the late-arrivals, certainly not the movement that will supersede it. A poet or a scholar will identify us to ourselves at some future point and in a moment of blinding clarity we will reject the identity and instantly become reactionary, we who now think of ourselves as some kind of *avant garde*. In the meantime, we are beginning to bore ourselves and each other, and that has to lead to something. Whatever it is, I look forward to it. To hell with all mature, quiet, patient poetry.

BOOKS BY WILLIAM WALL

NOVELS

This Is The Country (Sceptre, London - 2005) ISBN 0-340-82215-5

The Map of Tenderness (Sceptre, London - 2003) ISBN 0-340-82214-7

Minding Children (Sceptre, London - 2001) ISBN 0-340-75188-6

Alice Falling (Sceptre, London, and WW Norton, New York - 2000) ISBN 0-340-75187-8

SHORT STORIES

No Paradiso (Brandon Books, Daingean, Ireland - 2006) ISBN 0-86322-355-9

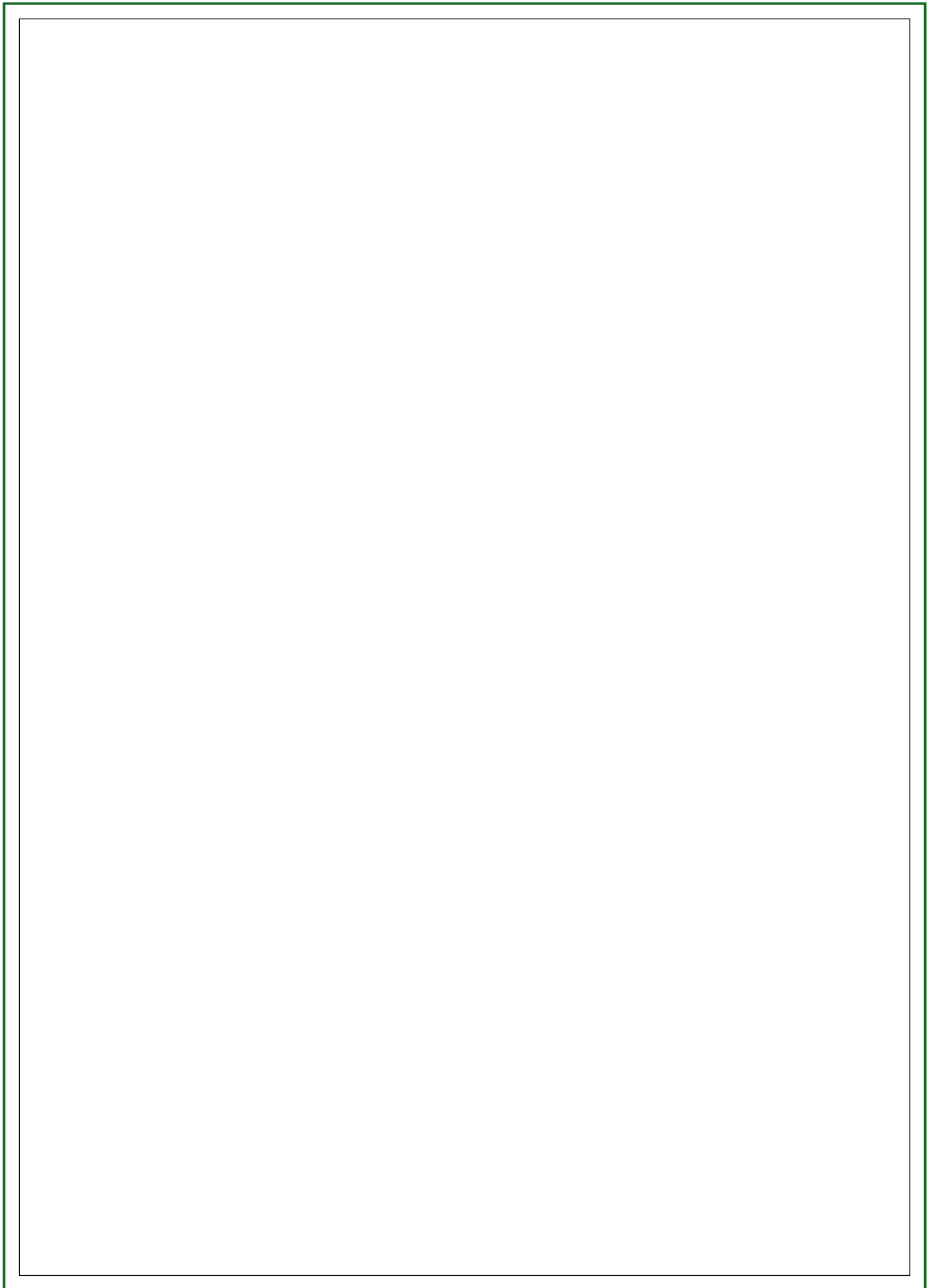
POETRY

Fahrenheit Says Nothing To Me (Dedalus Press, Dublin, Ireland - 2004) ISBN 1-904556-21-3

Mathematics And Other Poems (Collins Press, Cork, Ireland - 1997) ISBN 1-898256-26-8

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