

SAMPLER

Art of Seeing

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Art of Seeing

*Essays on Poetry, Landscape Painting,
and Photography*

SAMPLER
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SAMPLER

Introduction: Learning to see

My love of poetry began in childhood, before I could read. It began with nursery rhymes, but also with poems my mother read or recited to me, which she had loved from her childhood. These were English lyrical or narrative poems, from a book similar to Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, which she had studied at school before and during the First World War. This is where I must begin in introducing the essays in this book, which is a work of criticism that also comprises a chapter of aesthetic and spiritual autobiography. The main subjects I address are modern British and American poetry, Welsh poetry in English and British landscape painting, together with aspects of my own work as a poet. Since the emphasis is upon a personal view of things, I will begin by outlining and exploring the influences that have helped to shape my thinking and my practice as poet and critic.

I developed an early awareness of seeing – especially seeing nature – from my father. Looking at his landscape paintings, initially without really taking them in, I responded to his sense of colour. He was an 'amateur' painter, in the sense that he made a living by other means. He left school while still a boy to work with his father as a gardener; following the Second World War he became horticultural advisory officer to the New Forest area. But from boyhood he had had a passion for paint and colour, for *seeing as an artist*, which for him meant love of nature, and he painted landscapes all his life, until he went blind in his eighties. His conversation, as well as his art, brought me to love John Constable and the tradition of British landscape painting. Both my parents came from generations of labourers who worked on the land. They themselves kept throughout their lives a love of growing things and of country life.

I have retained my feeling for Constable while falling under the spell of Samuel Palmer and the Neo-Romantics, a tradition of British painting that artists such as David Tress continue into the present. My father inadvertently introduced me to the work of Paul Nash, but he had no sympathy with Modernism in any form. I had to learn to see modern art for myself. Later, my friendship and collaborations with the sculptor and painter Lee Grandjean introduced me to a whole new world of making and seeing. This was a new world and an old one, with lines of communication between them, since Lee apprehends sculptural and painterly image making as a continuum, not a series of discontinuous

movements. No one is more aware than Lee of the artist's need to make it new. But it was he who taught me about Cubism by showing me a thirteenth-century stained glass window.

In school, I was introduced to Shakespeare and Milton and a range of Romantic and modern poets. As a student in the early 1960s, at the same time as I was reading metaphysical poetry under the tuition of the poet F. T. Prince, I was responding enthusiastically to Beat literature, to Ginsberg's *Howl* and Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Patchen. At the same time, I was beginning to read British contemporaries, such as Charles Tomlinson, R. S. Thomas, and Ted Hughes. I wrote a thesis on W. H. Auden's early poetry, and read my way into his influences, Freud and Jung, Marx, Groddeck and Homer Lane, D. H. Lawrence and William Blake.

My move to Wales in 1965, to teach modern English literature at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, was decisive for the way in which I subsequently developed. The figure of the major Welsh-language poet Gwenallt, who had, ironically, a room in the English department, excited my curiosity. It began to dawn on me that there was a living Welsh poetry. Through *The Welsh Extremist*, by my colleague and friend Ned Thomas, and through contact with Welsh writers and intellectuals, I began to understand the critical situation of the country I had come to, so near and yet so far from England. Gradually, through translation, I learnt something of the great tradition of Welsh literature. In reading poems by Gwenallt and Waldo Williams and Saunders Lewis I encountered a live current of cultural and national concern, and passionate political and religious conviction. Through my neighbour Gwyn Williams and his selection and translations from 'the first Thousand Years of Welsh Verse', in *The Burning Tree*, I learned about the poetic tradition that began with Aneirin and Taliesin more than a thousand years ago and continues today. Due in part to the prison of monolingualism – I have failed to learn Welsh on several occasions, and have only a rudimentary grasp of any language other than English – Welsh-language poetry has remained for me a challenging 'other'. I could not hope to make the kind of contribution to Welsh culture that other incomers, such as my friends Tony Conran and Peter Lord have made. Nor could I bridge the two literatures of Wales, or move between Welsh and American literature, as M. Wynn Thomas does with such authority. My opportunity to give something back came with Welsh writing in English, or 'Anglo-Welsh' literature as I learnt to call it.¹

¹ This contested term has usually been replaced nowadays by 'anglophone Welsh literature', or 'Welsh writing in English', either of which I will sometimes use.

In my early years at Aberystwyth, some time in the later 60s, I met Roland Mathias, who befriended me. Roland gave me books to review for *The Anglo-Welsh Review* and published my first essays. One book that I reviewed, *The Lilting House*, an anthology of Anglo-Welsh poetry, introduced me to the work of David Jones. At roughly the same time, I discovered the novels of John Cowper Powys. Within the next five years I published monographs on Jones and Powys, and a comparative study of their work. Both were great writers who, at that time, had received relatively little attention. From that time, one of my primary motives as a critic has been to illuminate neglected work in the hope of helping it to become better known.

Fiona Sampson introduces her book, *Beyond the Lyric*, by saying of contemporary British poetry: 'At times it seems like a kind of club: only if you're already a member can you locate the entrance'.² In my view the best poetry of our time is rarely clubbable. More often, in the absence of a widely shared, authoritative sense of *what poetry is*, it involves a struggle with language and form to articulate an individual vision. In the wake of Modernism, and in response to the complex and dangerous world in which we live, poets who are my contemporaries, such as the American John Matthias, explore ways of 'fitting a late time'. The problem is compounded for the writer in Wales. As Diana Wallace says of Christopher Meredith, a Welsh writer with 'a growing international reputation', the fact that he is 'barely known in the rest of the UK... tells us something about the geographies of literary reception and the domination of a London-focused literary scene'.³ As a result of this focus, writers in Wales have been especially subject to neglect or condescension. One of the worst recent examples occurs in Sampson's book, where, in the space of two pages, she manages to insult the major poet, Ruth Bidgood, by speaking of her 'unstoppable name-calling', and proceeds (misspelling two names in the process) to dismiss the generation of 'Anglo-Welsh poets... who emerged in the Seventies'.⁴ I should admit that my name

However, I remain most comfortable with the earlier formulation, of which Dafydd Johnston writes: "The term 'Anglo-Welsh' should not be taken to imply any dilution of Welshness; indeed, it is most fittingly used of those writers who assert their Welsh viewpoint most vigorously". Dafydd Johnston, *The Literature of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017), 121.

² Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), 1.

³ Diana Wallace, *Christopher Meredith* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), p. vii.

⁴ Sampson, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

appears in Sampson's ample list. What angers me more, however, is my knowledge of the work of the poets whose names she lumps together so carelessly, work marked by considerable individual differences. I find it incomprehensible that an accomplished poet such as Sampson should want to pass this kind of thing off as literary criticism.

Starting to write criticism, I was naturally drawn to writers who were, in a sense, 'borderers' between England and Wales, such as Edward Thomas, David Jones, and John Cowper Powys. An interest in Powys was the occasion of my meeting Gerard Casey. Gerard, from an Irish Catholic family in Maesteg, had married into the Powys family. He was a man with a profound Christian vision, and author of *South Wales Echo*, one of the few outstanding Anglo-Welsh modernist long poems. His wife, Mary Casey, was a major lyric poet. More than anyone, Gerard helped me to take an independent stance towards contemporary intellectual fashions.

It was through Roland Mathias's encouragement that I began to write literary criticism regularly. At the same time that I met Roland, at Gregynog, I met Glyn Jones, John Tripp and Leslie Norris. In this early period, I also met Gillian Clarke and Emyr Humphreys, John Ormond and Raymond Garlick. On several occasions I shared a platform with R. S. Thomas. As an Englishman living in a Welsh-speaking area, I felt keenly the reasons for anti-English sentiments. During the 1970s my first wife and I lived at Llangwylfon, in Ceredigion, where an ancient pattern of Welsh life continued, but was under threat from influences brought in from outside. Awareness of being intruders was a factor in our decision to leave Wales. When I returned some fifteen years later it was to the anglicised south.

At Aberystwyth, while I was learning something of the two literatures of Wales, I was also encountering twentieth-century American poetry. It was the American poet, Bill Sherman, then a lecturer in American literature in the English department, who taught me to 'hear' Charles Olson and understand Black Mountain poetics. I had loved Walt Whitman since student days, but now I became excited by Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Gary Snyder delighted me, at the same time that his sense of American wilderness stimulated me to think of its contrast with the different experience of nature within the British Isles. T. S. Eliot, on whom I lectured regularly, had been part of my inner world since 1959, when my girlfriend had given me a copy of his *Collected Poems*.

Naturally, I found marked differences between American and Anglo-Welsh poets. There were, however, two important common factors. The

first was a passionate concern for place, for 'heartlands'. In Anglo-Welsh writers, this often focuses upon a sense of belonging, or desire to belong, and includes an element of *hiraeth*, with Welsh-speaking Wales perceived as the culture from which, without the primary language, they live in internal exile. Roland Mathias's metaphor of Wales as a house which he stands outside, looking in but unable to enter,⁵ is a particularly moving representation of this condition. The prevalence of place names in Ruth Bidgood's poetry shows the poet's love and respect for a deep, historical landscape, in which she wishes to ground herself, but without assuming an automatic right.

I understood the feeling well, because my own sense of belonging, to my original home in the south of England, was strong, and now I was seeing the loved ground from the outside, with longing to return, in spite of all that my life in Wales meant to me. Home territory in the south of England – country of Richard Jefferies and Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas, powerful emotional influences on me from my youth – became the subject of my first books of poems. It remains a world to which I shall always return imaginatively, as one does to places that are part of one.

Returning briefly to live in southern England in the early 1980s, I formulated an idea of 'a poem like a place':

Entering a place that is new to us, or seeing a familiar place anew, we move from part to part, simultaneously perceiving individual persons and things and discovering their relationships, so that, with time, place reveals itself as particular identities belonging to a network, which continually extends with our perception, and beyond it. And by this process we find ourselves, not as observers only, but as inhabitants, citizens, neighbours, and locate ourselves in a space dense with meanings.⁶

From living in Wales, I had absorbed a traditional idea of the poet as a functioning member of the community. But I had yet to take full measure of how much things had changed, in Wales as well as England, and consequently how difficult it is now for a poet to write *from* the life of place, as distinct from as a marginal figure, a stranger.

⁵ Roland Mathias, in Meic Stephens, ed. *Artists in Wales* (Llandysul: Gwasg Gomer, 1971), p. 163.

⁶ Jeremy Hooker, *Master of the Leaping Figures* (Petersfield: Enitharmon Press, 1987), p. 76.

The second common factor I became aware of between the situations of American and Anglo-Welsh poets was a sense of poetic possibility. In American poetry, the 'open field' offers an escape from tight formal structures, and from a limiting irony. It continues the cosmic outreach of Whitman's poetry. Anglo-Welsh poetry, largely from its contact with the Welsh literary tradition, and from its position on the 'border' between that tradition and Anglo-American modernism, is potentially a source of large imaginative possibilities. Only consider the work of Tony Conran, a great translator of Welsh poetry into English, who has drawn upon his knowledge to produce a body of major innovative poetry in English. Poets such as David Jones have lamented their inability to speak Welsh. But it is the feeling for the language and native culture just beyond their reach that enables them to bring something excitingly 'other' into poems in English. My friend Anne Cluysenaar, another incomer like myself, was drawn to Gwyn Williams's description of the designs of 'old Welsh poetry'. Williams extended the sense of design to Dylan Thomas and David Jones, claiming that the Welsh poets 'were not trying to write poems that would read like Greek temples or even Gothic cathedrals but, rather, like stone circles or the contour-following rings of the forts from which they fought, with hidden ways slipping from one ring to another'.⁷ This highly suggestive image indicates one way in which the very form of poetry influenced by living in Wales may relate to the physical, historical landscape. The situation of the poet in Wales is enhanced by access to realms of myth and 'British' history closed to most English poets. I do not claim that all Anglo-Welsh poets realise the imaginative possibilities of their position as 'borderers' between cultures – far from it. I do claim that such possibilities exist, in tension with conventional ideas of poetic craft.

I must emphasise that it is not my intention to suggest that Anglo-Welsh poetry shares no common ground with English poetry. It would be absurd to do so. Clearly, poets in Wales, in both languages, have drawn profitably upon both English and European poetic influences. What I do wish to stress is that English-language Welsh poets, with their access, however partial, to Welsh-language culture, as well as to other non-English sources, have had alternatives to the narrowing mentality of post-war English verse. For poets in both languages in Wales, the democratic spirit of *Lyrical Ballads*, which I discuss in this book, is integral to a specifically Welsh heritage with a strong communitarian spirit. My aim

⁷ From Preface, Gwyn Williams, *The Burning Tree: Poems from the First Thousand Years of Welsh Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956).

here is to emphasise the potential openness of Anglo-Welsh poetry to diverse powerful streams of native and foreign influence, and to counter the idea – unfortunately, still not uncommon both inside and outside Wales – that it is necessarily a product of provincialism.

I share with some other poets of my generation the need to construct a poetic tradition, in the absence of one that is given, and in opposition to prevailing conventions. Coleridge's idea of Wordsworth's object in *The Lyrical Ballads*, to awaken 'the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom', is fundamental to what I call 'art of seeing'. Wordsworth's attention to the wonders of the real world was strongly supported by his sister, Dorothy's eye for details of natural life. Behind these and other Romantic poets, with their close, loving perception of their native localities, stands the great, humble figure of Gilbert White of Selborne. White fathered the ecological vision that connects British and American poets with whom I feel close affinities.

As discussed in my book *Ditch Vision*, my personal introduction to this way of seeing, based on close attention to the natural and human life of home territory, was through the essays of the Victorian poet-naturalist Richard Jefferies, which I read when I was a boy. Jefferies has been a potent influence on certain writers, especially Edward Thomas and Henry Williamson, but he has never been accorded the importance in England his work deserves, which should be seen as equivalent to that of Thoreau in America. He has affinities with the Romantics but is also in certain respects a peculiarly modern writer, in whose 'art of seeing' I have come to recognise a close connection with the localism, clarity and care for particulars in William Carlos Williams and the Objectivists. A similar spirit animates poetry of place and love of the creaturely in David Jones and other Welsh poets.

Spirit is the key word connecting, across times and cultures, poets that are formally and in use of language very different from one another. It is noteworthy, for example, that different critics have detected a 'Franciscan' spirit in Thomas Hardy and William Carlos Williams. Both are poets in whom a strongly developed sense of self coexists with responsiveness to, and a tender regard for, the life around them.

It was probably from my early reading of Jefferies's essays that I first developed the conviction that everywhere is a 'centre'. By this I mean centre of life, both human and natural, the 'world' of each locality, as valuable as any metropolis. I grew up to be stubbornly parochial, in the sense that the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh defined. While 'the provincial

has no mind of his own, ... the parochial mentality ... is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish'.⁸ By this definition Homer is a parochial poet, as are Hardy and Williams. In Wales one thinks of the poet's *bro*, the known and loved locality in which universal meaning is to be found.

Learning to see, in ways that I am outlining here, I focused my attention as a critic on writers for whom their places were a centre, Anglo-Welsh writers, but also English and American poets, neglected or undervalued by critics with a metropolitan – that is to say, provincial – point of view. In the 1970s Anglo-Welsh writers were often neglected, and at times derided, even in their home country. A symptom of this was the difficulty Ned Thomas had in establishing a module in Welsh writing in English in the English department at Aberystwyth. How things have changed! Aberystwyth now hosts the David Jones Centre. I think of this ironically when I remember the relative isolation of my own early work on David Jones, when, studying in a caravan on the edge of a field in Welsh hill country, and feeling intense excitement while reading *The Anathemata*, I was astonished to receive one of David Jones's marvellous long letters, inspired by gratitude for something I had written about his work. This was humbling for a young writer to receive. It also made me realise the critical isolation that he, a great artist in old age, was experiencing. While such writers remained relatively neglected, I realised there was important work for a critic to do.

John Ormond once predicted for me a crisis from trying to pursue the twin roles of poet and critic. Thinking of myself as an academic, in Aberystwyth, certainly brought on a considerable strain in this respect. Later, while working in universities, I preferred to think of myself as a teacher – a role that I loved, indeed an art that can nurture the practice of other arts. Like most writers, I have experienced 'blocks'. Sometimes I have blamed them on the demands of my university work. At best, however, I see my roles as complementary. There are, no doubt, two 'voices' to be heard in my essays. Some are quite informal; others, with an academic context, use the first person singular sparingly, if at all. But in every instance when writing about others, I aim above all to be an attentive, careful *reader*. Naturally, I am drawn most to writers who speak to me as a poet, but I write to *see* their work, and to help others to understand and value it. Like Matthew Arnold in his study of Celtic

⁸ Patrick Kavanagh, *A Poet's Country*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput, 2003), p. 237.

literature, I disclaim a 'passion for finding nothing but myself anywhere'. Learning to see through encountering what is other than oneself is one form of autobiography. In Martin Buber's words, which encapsulate his *I and Thou* philosophy, 'All real living is meeting'.

According to Oscar Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography'. To that I would like to add one of my favourite quotations from John Cowper Powys: 'It is hard to be impersonal in a cosmos that runs to personality'.⁹ Autobiography is by definition a personal matter. In our time the idea of the person is under siege from theories that replace the 'I' with constructs formed by various power structures. Persons as centres of experience, let alone traditional concepts of 'soul', are seen as illusory. It therefore behoves someone who aspires to write personally to give an idea of what he means by it.

At my first meeting with Glyn Jones he reacted, as I later realised, quite out of character. At the time I was in a highly nervous state, and was recovering from a breakdown. This was the subject of a poem that I read to the group at Gregynog. I talked about the experience behind the poem. Characteristically, John Tripp liked my emotionalism, but it made Glyn angry. He told me, with feeling, that a poet should *use* disturbing inner experience as a source of imaginative energy, *not* talk about it. We were both shaken by the outburst. Whenever we met afterwards, Glyn would refer to it apologetically, and I would tell him he had done me a great service.

An idea of poetry I'd drifted into, partly in response to the 'confessionalism' of the 1960s, was what I would later regard as poetry of the brittle ego, concerned primarily with states of mind. Afflicted by what Edward Thomas in his book on Richard Jefferies called 'the terror' of self-consciousness, I found release through Martin Buber's philosophy, which foregrounds the relationship between self and other. Inspired in part by Glyn Jones's words to me, and influenced by Buber and by traditions within Welsh and American poetry, my settled aim has been to explore ways of objectifying the personal. This does not mean denying the 'I' of lyric poetry. It means, rather, an emphasis upon relationship, in the meeting between self and other.

In the 1970s I first encountered the work of the American poet George Oppen, who wrote:

⁹ John Cowper Powys, *A Glastonbury Romance* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1933), p. 909.

‘Thought leaps on us’ because we are here. That is the fact
of the matter.

Soul-searchings, these prescriptions

Are a medical faddism, an attempt to escape,
To lose oneself in the self.

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on.¹⁰

Oppen’s Marxist ethic places the self in society, in the humanly created world. His vision is not social only, but shares with Whitman a sense of the elemental cosmos. His idea of the self in relation to ‘something for us to stand on’ is not an idea imprisoned in a political dogma, and in my view, it can be placed alongside ideas arrived at from quite different starting points. Thus, Keats’s idea of the world as ‘The vale of Soul-making’ also emphasises self as process formed in relationship with what is outside it. I would also invoke David Jones’s words about his writing of *The Anathemata*, which for me are a talisman: ‘one is trying to make a shape out of the very things of which one is oneself made’.¹¹

My thinking is not bound by any of these definitions, though all matter to me a great deal. All have to do with self in relationship, and bring modern complications to Wordsworth’s idea of the poet as one who carries ‘every where with him relationship and love’. The question posed by Hölderlin, and interpreted by Heidegger, What is poetry for in a desolate time? haunts serious modern poets. Whether explicitly or implicitly, it troubles a number of the poets that I write about in this book. The Welsh poet has been traditionally a *man* with a strong sense of responsibility to his people. Both the rise of women poets, which has been one of the most exciting developments since the 1970s, and the breakdown of communities in Wales have complicated the relationship between poet and people for their Anglo-Welsh brothers and sisters. George Oppen agonised over his distance as a passionately committed, independent Marxist poet from the people whose social and political causes he espoused. This is one reason why his poetry matters so much. In the very texture of their work, in their sense of language, major modern

¹⁰ George Oppen, ‘World, World’, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York, NY: New Directions, 2002), p. 159.

¹¹ David Jones, *The Anathemata* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 10.

poets confront radical questions about communication between self and other, and poet and people.

This has a bearing on why I think of poetry as a learning to see. For me, it is an essentially exploratory act, or art. In my work I seek what I have come to think of as 'ground'. As I use the word, 'ground' is a metaphor – but not only a metaphor – which has evolved from my thinking about place. The idea began for me with the actual ground under foot, and extended to the total local environment, place comprising geology, ecology, history, culture, ancestry and family – forces that together with intimate experiences make the world that 'shaped' me. I had lived for some ten years in Wales before I felt that my sense of Welsh 'ground' – the place with which I had formed a relationship – was deep enough for me to be able to draw upon it as a poetic subject. Instead of beginning and ending with the brittle ego, I think of 'art of seeing' as an opening both outwards and inwards. As it explores the outer world – what Oppen refers to as the 'something' we stand on, and I think of as ground – so it is simultaneously a self-discovery and a self-enlargement. Through the personal the poet who sees in this way seeks to reveal common human depths. His or her art is necessarily questioning. It is also always unfinished, and any statement of it such as this, provisional.

In introducing the essays in this book, I am attempting to speak objectively of personal matters. This isn't easy when talking about my mother's gift of the love of poetry, or the sense of colour I received from my father, or any of the writers, artists or thinkers from whom I continue learning to see. It is always perilous to talk about one's own poetry, which is a continuing process, subject to new discoveries, not a completed product. Nor are the essays about other writers in this book intended as complete summaries of their work. My critical writing represented here covers a period of some thirty years. In many instances it is about writers who have gone on to produce a considerable body of work. What I offer here, therefore, is a view of parts of an ongoing process: a partial view of aspects of certain poets' work, not an attempt at a definitive vision of any one writer. As a critic, I aim for objectivity. I should say, though, that there's nothing objective in my feelings for Wales and the literatures of Wales. Friendships across the generations have enriched my life in Wales. Having said which, I must add that no poet I know would be other than horrified to be told that he or she belongs to any kind of poets' club.