

ON POETRY – ENTERING HEAVEN THROUGH THE EAR OF A RAINDROP: AN ARS POETICAL READING

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the uniqueness of poetry. Special attention is given to the *ars poetica* of the poetry of Cas Vos. Other poems are also discussed. The binding force of metaphors in poetry is considered. The essence and expressiveness of poetry are explained through several different poems. The end of the journey of poetry is concluded with a sonnet by Robert Pinsky.

INTRODUCTION: PREPARE FOR THE JOURNEY

What makes poetry so different? So unique? Is it the breath? The landscape? The streaming images? Is it because through poetry, the reader or audience enters heaven through the ear of a raindrop (Heaney 1996:1)? These never-ending questions are like rolling waves.

Poiesis means *making* and, as the ancient Greeks recognised, the poet is first and foremost a *maker*. To make poems does not mean to imitate, but to construct different versions (Breytenbach 2006:74; cf. Paglia 2005:xv). The Greeks saw no contradiction in the truth that poetry is somehow or other inspired, and simultaneously an art (*techné*); a craft requiring a merging of talent, training and many years of practice. In the Renaissance the word *makers*, as in *courtly makers*, was an exact equivalent for poets. The word *poem* became English in the 16th century and it has been with us ever since to designate a form of fabrication, a type of composition, a made thing (Hirsch 1999:31–32).

'Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul.' This maxim, beloved by Simone Weil and Paul Celan, can stand as a writer's credo (Hirsch 1999:1). Paul Celan (cited in Hirsch) wrote:

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the not always greatly hopeful belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense, too, are under way: they are making toward something.

(Celan, in Hirsch 1999:13)

Poetry is a language to which a special emphasis has been given, whether by paring it down and arranging it pleasingly on the page, in lines whose length may be baffling to all but the poet, or by the traditional means that include

- raising the voice in order to be heard above the crowd;
- raising the voice in order to demonstrate its beauty and power;
- chanting the words;
- reciting the words rhythmically;
- punctuating the units of speech (which will become the lines of the poem) with rhymes;
- setting the words to tunes and singing them in unison, as in a drinking song (Fenton 2003:10).

On the surface, poetry is a consciousness of words. To create poetry is to broaden the consciousness. Consciousness is a dance to the melody of meaning, imagination, remembrance, oblivion and ingenuity (Breytenbach 2006:180–181).

The process of making a poem is summed up in the following lines from Yeats' poem *Adam's Curse* (Allison *et al.* 1983:879):

*A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.*

Poetry as breath penetrates to where the body recognises the stirring of meaning. Poetry mediates, on a particular and immensely valuable level, between the inner consciousness of the individual reader and the outer world of people (Pinsky 2002:45–46). When words touch paper, salt can be transformed into ash. Poetry on the page – a visual construct – lasts (Paglia 2005:xii).

THE DYNAMICS OF A METAPHOR

A characteristic of a poem is its texture. Texture is the language with which a poem is woven. It is the colour and sparkle of language. Like prose, poetry utilises language. But the poet colours the language differently to the writer of prose. What are the characteristics of poetical language? Like a river that is full of water, a poem is full of images and metaphors. But what is a metaphor? According to Aristotle, *metaphor* means to give something a name that belongs to something else. The word *metaphor* comes from the Greek words *meta* (over) and *pherein* (carry). From this, the Latin word *metaphora* was created, implying 'figurative' (Degenaar 1970:294). It is a transfer of energies, a mode of interpretation, a matter of identity and difference (Hirsch 1999:13).

A metaphor is about depiction and the imagination. When a metaphor creates a relationship between two domains, new associated connections are brought about. The metaphor opens our eyes to see. The

result is mostly surprising and strange. A metaphor is like an eel; it is smooth, fast, slippery and fresh. The living metaphor makes language new. The wonder of a metaphor is that it allows people to put together things that they otherwise would not have. It makes completely new ways of seeing possible. In this article, no fully expanded theory of metaphors is given (*cf.* in this regard Degenaar 1970; Du Plessis 2006). The reader is rather invited to discover poems through the power of metaphors. Consider these lines from a poem by Rochelle Kraut (Paglia 2005:210):

My Makeup

*on my cheeks I wear
the flush of two beers
on my eyes I use
the dark circles of sleepless nights
to great advantage
for lipstick
I wear my lips*

Metaphors are like dynamite, forcing people to consider new insights and blasting open new worlds.

DIRECTIONS FOR A POETICAL JOURNEY

Allow me to introduce you to a few poems. But before I do so, I would like to give you a few directions.

*Take a gentle breath at dusk
and anoint your feet with oil
before you leave on your travels.
On a journey without shelter or shade
won't the sun fuel a fever?
and the moon chase away cataracts?
And when, drenched in journey's sweat you come
knocking at the gateway; turn your eyes
to the ancient, wrinkled mountains.*

(Vos 2008)

RELIGIOUS POEMS

The first poem I want to share with you has a religious undertone:

*She falls on her little girl knees at night and asks:
Keep my heart pure of false gods and desires.
God's breath blows over the earth
and finds in her, a holy hollow
to fill with godly seed
As He strokes her with his finger,
she takes fright; her cheeks suddenly flushed.
She hears her lover standing shuffling outside,
his carpenter's hands hesitant to knock.
The night stirs heavily; a curtain shielding a secret
Because God is all, He is alone.
Therefore He, the Holy, travels
after a short earthly sojourn
past night's silver sickle
drifting between the stars
to his far, far, land.*

*Angelic melodies fill the universe,
their harmonies satiate one and all.
Their wings light, but fleeting
over the brown and rough earth
as the Child, gasping for air
spills out in a pool of blood.
Flames flicker on his face.*

(Vos 2008)

I also present here a poem that deconstructs the well-known Psalm 23. The poem aims to draw on the experience of people.

The Lord is not my shepherd

*The Lord is not my shepherd,
I remain deprived.*

*He leads me to the wasteland
and lets my blood run dry.
He takes me to a cross
where disquiet breeds,
where he abandons me.*

*He leads me down twisted paths
to seek his honour, lost.*

*I crawl through the abysmal darkness,
my heart frantic with fear,
you withdrew your hand from me,
turned your back as I came near.
And you crucify me,
before my jeering enemies.
You receive me as though a thief,
I am overcome with shame.
Although you are painfully absent,
I shall continue to long for you,
I am, the sacrificial lamb.*

(Vos 2008)

POEMS FOR ASTRALABE

Abelard was especially known in theology for his stance on the doctrine of reconciliation. A younger contemporary of Anselm, he was exceedingly critical of the doctrine of objective atonement for which Anselm had become known. Abelard's critique was aimed particularly against the idea that God had to be given atonement as a precondition for God's forgiveness of man's sin. Instead of seeing Christ's death as a substitutionary atonement for sin, Abelard believed God's love to be revealed in Christ. Abelard found the grounds for forgiveness of our sin in inner justice, which is then effected in us (Berkhof 1973:322–333; Jonker 1977:128).

Western theology ultimately chose Anselm with his emphasis on juridical interpretation (Berkhof 1973:322). In my opinion the tension between these two points of view should rather be retained...Abelard follows the line of Johannine thought, while Anselm follows Paul. There is room for a creative tension between these two viewpoints. The poems given here concern Astralabe,¹ the son born of Abelard and Heloise's love relationship. In the presented poems beats the heart of desolation, of reconciliation as love.

Astralabe: Conversations of abandonment

Intimate abandoned one

*Monastery candles glow
with inscriptions of light
upon your strange name.*

*Your life long you bore
wounds on your back,
lost the track
in the thickest fog.*

*Canon of Nantes,
you sing God's praise,
your words creep
up the monastery walls.*

The peal of a bell

1. An extraordinary name, to say the least, bringing to mind some celebrity toy of the tabloids. An astrolabe is a scientific instrument used to measure the height of celestial bodies, though the word was also (falsely) etymologised as *astris lapsus*, 'fallen from the stars.' Few details of the life of Petrus Astralabius are available. That he grew to manhood, maintained at least some contact with his parents and took up a career in the Church is indicated by the request Heloise makes of Peter the Venerable for a prebend for 'your Astralabe' in her letter to him after Abelard's death. There is an 'Astralabe' recorded as a canon of the cathedral of Nantes c. 1150, and this is almost certainly he, although there is more doubt about someone of that name who appears as abbot of the monastery of Hauterive in Fribourg in 1162–1165 (Levitan 2007:13). The etymology of the name can be explained as follows: Astralabe is composed of 'astra' and 'labe' (the ablative of 'labis'). *Labis* can be rendered 'stain' or 'blemish', while *astra* means 'star'. Astralabe, then, means 'Starstain' or 'Starblemish'.

echoes in the wind

*no sadness
for the silence
of your death.*

*Intimate abandoned one,
I am writing this verse
to remember you in the shadows
of oblivion.*

Intimate absentees

*In darkness of night I see light
over my crib like stars strung together.
Too soon, I am estranged from the nipple
and embraced by my father's sister.
Timidly I prepare for my monkhood.
Prayer and song my daily bread
and loneliness my goblet of grief.*

*By candlelight I read on parchment
my father's letter to me – his deep delight –
about theology, ethics, logic and wisdom.
I had hoped an estranged beloved
would bring me bread, grapes and wine.*

*I see an expanse of shadows outside
and stars reflecting like mirrors.
Here, in my monastery, my relatives are absent:
The white and silent longing
intimately embraces their presence.*

Those left behind

*In night's orchard you tasted love
and I remind you of this.
In my monastery I call out your names
like moss on damp walls, they grow.*

*I am afraid of night,
and I think of your slumber
where you've been stripped to the bone
cold and bloodless
without urge and passion
lying still next to one another.*

*I save your names like sighs
on parchment, my testament
to your absence.*

*The sun creeps in behind mountains
and lies under a black blanket,
shadows blemish everything.*

*I long for eternal slumber
to solemnise in dark silence,
my intimate abandonment.*

Centuries of time

*threadbare seams hang
over foothills
where with fine words
i weave another poem
centuries lie between us
full of sighs and blame
for too long covered by
dust's forgetfulness
i let you decay in the wind*

*your deep and dark slumber
reminds me of your name
old loneliness moves
over your silence and loss
between leaves' shadows
the moon reaches last light
where you wait in the dark*

*for the blinding sun
you don't know me
perhaps i know you*

Before I leave you

*does the wind's soft hand still write your name in the sand
are you still lost in the dust of your absentees
do you see light under the cloak of night quivering afar
do images still drift in your hidden memories somewhere*

*forgive your beloved's silence
before i leave you*

candle smoke smoke drawings - diane victor

*candles flare up
and let visions
dance lightly*

*like the first
godly breath
i lay you out
in smoke
on paper*

*see your shadow
struggle defencelessly
against decay*

*when trembling i touch you
you disappear
into a white void*

*on my paper
your smoke spoor
remains*

(Vos 2009)

LOVE POEMS

Love poems are the heartbeat of poetry (cf. Neruda 2008; Breitenbach 2000), and therefore I present a love poem here.

Most beloved

Inspired by a poem from Breyten Breytenbach

*Most beloved, I send to you an e-mail dove
for no-one plucks a show dove's quills.
My fingers spread wings of wind across the keyboard,
stain the computer's keys with words of love
flying high and low over my white screen.*

*Look, my dove swoops and dives
on electric currents
and where he flies my message shimmers
to stain your eyes green:
you must always know my beloved of my love
as of wings which cannot carry flight.
You will see my love touching down
shimmering on your heart's screen*

(Vos 2008)

POEMS ABOUT LIFE

The third series of poems are about life and its troubles.

Marriage

*A year or five after the wedding
late at night, a wife turns with words
to the husband's ears.
She is lingering somewhere on the threshold of grief
and silently, he denies everything.*

*The husband's tongue
swells with lies of
meetings, investments,*

cocktail parties, companions.
He analyses lost symbols,
bathes himself in the holy mud,
tastes the dark moon.
He starts to falsify truth,
like poets sometimes do
behind a mask of irony.

Desperate of heart,
the husband looks for his wife
where the lonely nights
slide like eyelids over her eyes.
On the plains
of his imagination, he finds
the imprint of her hands.

There is hardly a place for
God and his commandments in a cold war.
And husband and wife drag each other
into dark trenches.

"Let us try again.
Let us look for new dreams
in the rustling night.
Forget all the mistakes,
let's begin again
soft and green like leaves,
the same blame,
the same soft kisses,
the same covering of nakedness
the same rhythm
of charm and sex
so that the simple things
can touch us behind the silence.
But we must tread carefully,
because life is full of precipices
and love is a ravine."

So they wait for the future and on the gods
in a land where wonders are rare.

They go dancing, then turn to
one another for the death-blow in the night

(Vos 2008)

A POEM WITH SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS

Poems can also have social and cultural sensitivity. To some extent, poetry includes the social realm because poetry's very voice evokes the attentive presence of the other (Pinsky 2002:300). Here is one of my poems as an example.

The song of the earth

The earth sings the song of our lives
in places where the days between us
sneak silently like secret agents.
We live in dark days.

The sickle moon hangs over thirsty lands.
Judgement is mercilessly executed.
through slaughter and mutilation
fenced-in torture and death camps.
Blood stains the earth's song.
Flames scorch the meadows,
people scatter like scared rats
in wastelands searching for breath.
Soldiers limping without conscience
on bloodied tracks.

Angels with red cheeks
and scorched wings
hands in the ashes.
One dark night the gods
fled from the dead land.

Who can blame them?
Their only inheritance –
pages black with old blood,
strewn with bleached skulls –
reminders of wars that drag on.

The moon hangs like a sickle
over frightened hearts and anxious throats,
the wind blows icily on wounds.

Dust drifts over the ruins
of past monuments.
Vukajlo Kukulj and Radonja Vešović's
poems overflow with grief in dark days

Bach and Mozart's names echo in empty recital halls.
Paintings eagerly gather layers of dust.

Pictures fade.
Silence reigns.
The moon is razor sharp,
the earth's face scratched
from the onslaught of man.
We live in dark days

(Vos 2008)

THE END OF THE JOURNEY OF POETRY

The reader's poetical journey is concluded with a sonnet by Robert Pinsky (1996:89).

Sonnet

Afternoon sun on her back,
calm irregular slap
of water against a dock.
Thin pines clamber
over the hill's top –
nothing to remember,
only the same lake
that keeps making the same
sounds under her cheek
and flashing the same color.
No one to say her name,
no need, no one to praise her,
only the lake's voice-over
and over, to keep it before her.

Poetry is a journey through moonless chasms, sun-drenched mountains, dark descents and open plains. It is a journey of the spirit and the body through surprising and delightful landscapes.

Bon voyage!

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