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HISTORY AND DISPOSSESSION IN JOHN GLENDAY'S POETRY

John Glenday was born in Monifieth near Dundee in 1952. He is still a comparatively young poet; all the younger, one might add, as he only started writing poetry « in earnest » in 1983. The diversity of his occupations after his studies in English Literature and Language at the University of Edinburgh, as well as his present occupation as a psychiatric nurse in a Dundee hospital, may well contribute to the density and intensity in his writing. In what is still at times a rather tentative articulation of emotions he already has a remarkable sense of economy and compression and the knack of turning out effective endings. As in the verse of many twentieth-century British poets the most perceptible influence on his diction is probably that of T.S. Eliot, with, Eliot's theoretical statements notwithstanding, perhaps less lyricism and more factual soberness.

His concern with history is very much in evidence in several of his poems. It takes an original dimension when history is projected into the future, as happens in a whole sequence. If we took history to refer to any chronicle of past events the theme would be even more pervasive, since much of his poetry records episodes in the lives of members of his own family. Here, however, I have limited the meaning of the word to the recording of such events as have an immediately collective dimension.

History, in Glenday's lines, is made part of our present and is suggested through references to everyday details. This may be an indication of good

poetry : history comes to life, lessons do not have to be drawn, they throb in the words. A poet may use a textbook, the result will be something essentially different, often something more appealing and apparently more accessible, yet in fact far more complex than the source-text. This is because the intricacies that had been removed for the sake of clarity and readability are restored in another guise in the poetic text, often in the reader's awareness of different layers superimposed upon each other. This, incidentally, is strikingly true of the poetry of another twentieth-century writer associated with the Celtic world, David Jones.

History helps to come to terms with the present. I wonder, for instance, to what extent it will be relevant to future commentators to know that the poems based on Walt Whitman's recollections of the American Civil War and written in January 1991 were in fact a way of expressing his «anger at the Gulf debacle»¹, of diverting his revulsion at the vanity of «the whole show» by «relentlessly [researching] the stupidity of the wastes of lives in 1863»? This is history as indirect comment on a present situation, simultaneously deflating much of the grandiloquent *mise en scène* of «Desert Shield» and «Desert Storm,» and exposing the ultimate pointlessness and wastefulness of such endeavours.

History brought back to life in the present may also serve as a way of tracing the shadows cast by a not unlikely future, if only as urgent warning against such possibilities. At the end of «A Defence of Poetry» Shelley defines poets as «the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present.»² In the sequence «From an Occupied Country» Glenday's mirror catches the appalling shadows of an all too plausible future of nuclear waste and military terror.

Glenday does not go in for grand historical scenes. He rarely records those events which history books have defined as epoch-making. In this respect «Snow at Dachau, 1945»³ may seem rather atypical. Yet the poem is not only an apt beginning for an examination of history and dispossession, it is also characteristic of Glenday's approach and treatment. It is plain from line 8 («Shuffling towards the camera») that what is presented here was seen in a film. He had in fact, he informs us, watched «a documentary film by the American photojournalist George Stevens,» and the poem records his reaction to the documentary rather than the event itself.

The first five lines consist of four short sentences, two of them without a verb. The lines are petrified as it were, ostensibly because of the low tem-

perature, but more compellingly still because of the sheer horror of a scene from which humanity has been so effectively banished. There is a thawing of sorts in lines 6-7, and as human life makes itself manifest, the sentence grows longer and more structured.

In the last four lines the camera becomes static while the recorded scene becomes animated. As the survivors «[shuffle]» the poem presents yet another movement: from the scene on the other side of the lens into the speaker's soul. The survivors' stare calls upon the poet to remember them, and the final subclauses express his willingness to let them fill the «vacant wagons» of his memory.

This short poem economically suggests a horrified disbelief which is beyond pity or indignation.

The sense of utter dispossession is extreme and officially sanctioned for those imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. It was probably almost as acute, though not as dramatic on the world stage, among those driven away from their crofts and left to starve, steal or sail away by «clearing» landlords in the nineteenth century. The poem entitled «A House At Borerraig» (p. 40) was, Glenday writes, «inspired by an etching in an exhibition called «As An Fearann» (From the Land) dealing with the Highland Clearances.» There may not be many of his printed poems which deal explicitly with the Clearances, but that tragedy of dispossession deeply informs his perception of the world.

The extent to which the Clearances have marked the Scottish collective memory is not often appreciated by Continentals. In fact it is rarely fully understood even by English people. That period did after all correspond to a time of expansion under the triumphant twin banners of Free Enterprise and industrial development. Now that we have almost completely succeeded in exporting starvation to countries misleadingly called «developing» we often tend to forget the amount of deprivation which accompanied the Industrial Revolution, of which enclosures and clearances were side-effects. In Scotland, and particularly in the Highlands, landlords decided to get people out and sheep in for economic reasons, and their «factors» significantly a word of undeniable Norman origin, were to act the arch villains. These land-stewards implemented their masters' decisions and in some cases gave spurious explanations. Maps show that in the eighteenth century the Highlands were significantly more densely populated than they

are now. Traces of this occupation can still be seen everywhere on the hillsides. In the same volume Marie-Hélène Thevenot tells the grim tale of what happened in Sutherland. The same purposeful acts of wilful deprivation were perpetrated everywhere, only the amount of cynicism differed. In the case of the Boreraig community (in the south of the Isle of Skye), Glenday writes, «Lord Macdonald's factor stated that his master had been motivated by notions of piety and concern to remove the folk from Boreraig because "they were living too far from a church" »

The poem begins with the poet refusing the visit which the title leads readers to expect : «I'll not go to the house at Boreraig.» What follows is an explanation of this emphatic expression of unwillingness, with a rather odd form of the negation in a stressed position. What is to be found in Boreraig is the triumphant formlessness of natural life as it gradually and almost absent-mindedly swallows up all signs of human presence. There, tragedy is eroded as walls crumble away from the straight lines once imposed by a human hand and as year after year the rowan tree, which forfeited its reputation as bringer of good luck, sheds its leaves, and with them memories of the time when the place was a living community.

This is contrasted with the poet's determination to preserve those memories. Apparently futile evidence of daily occupations brutally interrupted become symbols of vicarious retrospective guilt and warnings to ward off similar evils.

The enumeration that follows is presented as a number of entries in a ledger, an inventory of now useless utile possessions, which is also a pathetic record of vanished everyday activities. The last item stands out at once as different. Here the sober list becomes incantation — the kind of nursery rhyme incantation we find in «The House that Jack Built,» but there is something of the magic formula in the repetitive structure and the gradual widening of context in these successive lines of two stresses each, ending with the climactic focusing on the item itself. Lock, door, wall, house, each is qualified by its specific form of destruction, and each in turn prevents the key from performing any further service. Yet the key still functions. It can still open and disclose, but layers of memory, not the broken door. It turns «infinitesimally,» a rare, difficult word used here to refer to an action requiring rare powers of perception. The «hidden grave» is ultimately the poet's heart, and the key is a precarious means of access to buried memories.⁴

With its restraint and its insistence on the common and the everyday, but the undeniably human, «The House at Boreraig» is typical of Glenday's treatment of history.

The other poems I propose to discuss all come from the final sequence in the collection *The Apple Ghost* : «From an Occupied Country.» The country is Scotland occupied by the English. (This is clear in the last poem «Goodbye,» where he mentions «the spare constraints of your tongue,» its «thin vowels and ashy consonants.») It is also the planet earth at some point in the future when it is globally occupied by military lawlessness and slowly made uninhabitable by the aftermath of a nuclear war.

«The Star» (p. 58), a modern rewriting of the Christmas story triggered by the recollection of a meteor which actually fell through the roof of a homestead in Perthshire at the beginning of the century, is perhaps even more blood-curdling in its straightforward horror than Yeats's counterpart, «The Second Coming» : «Meanwhile, death struggled / from the virgin's womb, / smiling with pain.» A poem such as «The End Of The Hot Water Bottles» (p. 51), focusing as it does on the collective and final failure to serve their purpose of a common and hardly ever mentioned instrument, is a mock epic treatment of the tragic breakdown of our civilization in its most domestic aspects.

The two poems «A Difficult Colour» and «A Traditional Curse» integrate nineteenth-century memories into that future fiction, which makes it even less of a fiction, and therefore more immediately frightening.

«A Difficult Colour» (p. 56) is a subtle piece of writing. The «difficult colour» of the title is more than a mere colour. It is the colour of leaving, the colour of heartbreak, the colour of their uncertain sea crossing which awaits the group of footloose sea wanderers driven away from the sanctuaries of homes. As Glenday explains, during the Clearances people who had escaped saw their homes being set on fire behind them. What light and colour there is in the rainy night come from crofts which are burning, not in some accidental fire but because of arson. The strength of the fourth verse comes from the paradox : there is something sacred about such unholy deeds. While beginning and end establish the intellectual distance of problem-solving, the trembling reflections on the water are in fact the colour of grief. Feelings are kept out, or kept in, yet powerfully present.

«A Traditional Curse» (p. 59) is the grim wish for a terrible revenge on one of those guilty of burning crofts. It is a nightmare hypothesis, based on

the old Gaelic curse that noone would find the grave to mourn you, of someone buried alive and unable to escape the confines of his coffin. The cursing voice imagines the person he curses reviving first in what may seem rather pleasant circumstances : « beneath a calm sky, / hanging larks. » Only in the following line does the full horror emerge : he would be cut off from sky and larks by « freshly stamped turf. » In the short and shortening lines of the fourth and fifth verses the nightmare curse is made all the more effective in the last verses in that the cries are heard, and not heard. These lines indicate both that the fool dug the grave and that he does not care that the corpse is still alive. Like Joyce's God he is paring his fingernails – a clear indication of indifference.

« The Crossing » (p. 61-62) is a short epic poem. It is told by a first-person narrator in the name of a small community of fugitives. Crossing over to the other side of an undefined stretch of water is the aim and purpose that sustains the group in its flight. But there will be no crossing. All crossings have become pointless.

Place and actors are badly defined. We do not know where they are fleeing from, nor the place they hope to go to, all we know is that the channel they look forward to crossing serves as a natural border between territories swayed by looting rebels and a part of the land reported to be controlled by government forces. The few people referred to as « we » are caught in a war where there are no heroes and villains, only villains and victims (and in most cases victims turn villains and villains are victims). The situation is sadly familiar from all exodus situations through long centuries of human warfare since Old Testament records of divinely ordained looting and slaughtering. Yet it is much worse than anything known so far.

It is indeed clear from a number of unobtrusive details that this war has involved nuclear bombing. The time of year is summer, but a summer so « bitter, » so cold, that the fields are frozen (l. 9) and « there had been snow » (l. 38). The assumption behind the statement that they « didn't pause / to count the fingers » of the still-born infant (ll. 9-10) is that it was likely not to have the right number. The fish caught in the blind man's net are « stunted » and have « warped spines » (ll. 51 & 52). From the reference to « a crossbow bolt » (l. 20) we can assume that nuclear warfare has been followed by a dramatic collapse even in killing techniques.

The fugitives are helpless and rootless in a lawless world. They too are uprooted wanderers, hapless inheritors of the disinherited victims of the

nineteenth-century clearances. Many of those were dreaming of another crossing, to the other side of the Atlantic, to the El Dorado of the New World. Here their dream of a peaceful land beyond is utter deception. The last line « We moved on the next day » is a hollow repetition of the opening statement. « We pushed on » implies difficulties and obstacles, but at least some goal to be reached. After their encounter with the blind man they have no goal any more.

The restrained and weary tone of the telling is reminiscent of Eliot's « Journey of the Magi. » The teller is striving towards objectivity and detachment. Emotions are kept under, suggested sometimes by missing words, as when they reach the town (l. 18), or implicitly projected from the struggling fish to the straggling survivors.

Understatement is the only possible mode in front of such prospect. Even so, such texts do not bear being looked at for too long if we want to retain some hold on the trivialities of everyday life.

« Red Shift » (p. 50) is the opening poem of the sequence. Like the final poem, but in a far more inclusive way, it is a leave-taking. To some extent the last poem is a preliminary to this far more final « goodbye. » Indeed what we are taking leave of, or what is leaving us, is no less than the miraculous concourse of circumstances that made our planet a welcoming bed for the development of life and the thriving of our conscious and self-conscious species. With the terrible knowledge, as at the end of « The Crossing, » that there is nowhere else to go.

The title, with its reference to the Doppler-Fizeau Effect, sets the poem in the cosmic context made plain in the last lines : « something is leaving / our world. » We are left stranded on an uninhabitable planet. To Glenday red, the colour of tail lights on cars or trains, is « the colour of goodbye. » It seems thus perfectly fitting that the colour of stars moving away should be perceived as shifting towards red and infrared.

Red in the first line of the poem is first the colour of sunsets. Not so much the heat of the sun as its unfiltered rays are affecting the cells of our skins with a form of burning which only hurts when it is too late. Meanwhile, birds having presumably been killed by pesticides, insects thrive and prosper : « in the fly-sprung twilight. » That something is rotten in the kingdom of man is confirmed by the crimson drooping flesh of the salmon, while

man's violence against man has assumed again the medieval form of capital punishment for poaching. Skin, flesh, blood : all are red in their variously diseased conditions. Poppies should be red, but are blue, and of a deadly blue : « their cyanotic beauty. » Butterflies are not only an apt comparison for fragility, they are also associated with the souls of the departing dead, another sign of leaving within the poem.

Philosophers and scientists are equally helpless. Philosophers can only « detachedly » philosophize on aesthetic matters. Scientists observe and deduce that something essential is seriously wrong. Their considerations are so chillingly irrelevant that they have an almost surrealist quality. At this point it is hard not to think that perhaps it isn't too late now, and that perhaps more philosophers and scientists should show concern about the future of mankind and of our badly mangled earth.

The final words in the poem invite to a dizzy plunge with some receding star into infinite interstellar darkness. This cosmic dimension is unusual in Glenday's poetry. His concern is with the common lives of common people. In his historical explorations, as indeed in many other poems, he expresses a sharp sense of dispossession. Yet a successful poem, whatever regret or warning it may contain, is an achievement in itself, and so it is inescapably ambiguous in its appeal. The terrible beauty of fear which radiates from the poems in which history is conjugated in the future tense is also a « splendour of forms » and as such a source of pleasure.

Notes

1. Letter to me, dated Edmonton 1 February 1991. When explanations by Glenday are referred to elsewhere in this paper they are quoted from this letter.
2. P.B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in A.G. George (ed.), *Makers of Literary Criticism*, Asia Publishing House (London, 1967), p. 180.
3. John Glenday, *The Apple Ghost*, Peterloo Poets (Calstock, 1989), p. 33. Other page references are given in the text.
4. The last two words of the poem, « hidden grave, » also call up, beyond the reference to a buried community, a trail of Celtic legends involving sleeping heroes under the hills, of whom Malory's Arthur, the once and future king, is but a late avatar. On these Celtic legends see, among others Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain*, Allen Lane (London, 1971), Myles Dillon and Nora Chatterick, *The Celtic Realms*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson (London, 1967), T.C. Lethbridge, *Gogmagog. The Buried Gods*, Routledge and Kegan Paul (London, 1957).

LA VIEILLE FEMME, TÉMOIN ET GARDIENNE DU PASSÉ ? DANS L'ŒUVRE DE IAIN CRICHTON SMITH

La vieille femme, dans l'œuvre de Iain Crichton Smith, est l'élément central et stable du village contrairement à l'homme qui est fréquemment absent parce qu'en mer ou mort trop jeune. C'est un fait que l'homme adulte jeune est assez rarement mis en scène, sauf absent, par Crichton Smith.

Il est nécessaire de résister à la tentation de réduire toutes les vieilles femmes qui sont des personnages de fiction, à l'image de la mère de l'auteur. Le roman intitulé *On The Island* est une suite de récits quasi autobiographiques relatant l'enfance de Iain Crichton Smith. Au chapitre 11 le petit garçon demande à sa mère de raconter qui était son père. On apprend, incidemment, que le père est mort de tuberculose alors que son fils était en bas âge et que par la suite la mère a quitté Glasgow avec son fils pour s'installer à Lewis. Le petit garçon dans le récit s'appelle Iain, tout comme l'auteur. Crichton Smith a lui aussi passé son enfance sur l'île de Lewis. Crichton Smith a lui aussi grandi dans une famille monoparentale, puisque sa mère ne s'est pas remariée. Et dans la mesure où sa mère adhérait à la *Free Kirk*, C.S. a subi une éducation presbytérienne stricte. Plus tard, après ses années d'études et de service militaire lorsqu'il a travaillé comme