

## LAURENCE LERNER

### *The History of a Poem*

“He became his admirers,” wrote Auden in his elegy on Yeats. To a modern school of reader-response criticism, this is a tautology. If the meaning of a text is constituted in the act of reading, if it has no intrinsic or objective meaning but only that which is attributed to it by those who interpret, then to say of Yeats’ poems “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living” is not going far enough: the words of the dead man come into being in the consciousness of the living. If the poet returned from the dead to say “That is not what I meant; that is not what I meant at all” he would, like poor Prufrock, be condemned to frustration. After the death of the author, the critics come and go, talking of Michelangelo, talking of T. S. Eliot, and creating the meaning of the texts they talk about.

It is not even necessary for the author to be dead. To his friends and the census taker he may be alive, but in the Barthesian sense he will be dead as all authors are dead in order that (according to Barthes) their readers may be born. The extreme of this is the scriptible (or ‘writerly’) text — in which the meaning is provided by the reader — replacing the old idea of the lisible (or ‘readerly’) text. The obvious objection to this, that in that case any text could mean anything according to the whims of the individual reader, is met by Stanley Fish’s concept of “interpretive communities”: the rules of interpretation are as rigid as for any old-fashioned historical scholar, but they derive from the reading practices of the community to which the reader belongs (and the writer, presumably, doesn’t, or didn’t). The prime example of an interpretive community today is obviously a university English Department. The words of Yeats are modified in their well-trained and orderly — and powerful — guts.

The story I am about to tell can be seen as a way of putting this theory to the test. It is the story of how my words were “wholly given over to unfamiliar affections”. The author in this case is not dead — indeed, he could not tell the story if he were. He is merely, shall we say, ‘dead’.

My poem ‘A Wish’ was published in *The Listener* in 1964, and appeared in my book *Selves* in 1969.

Often I’ve wished that I’d been born a woman.  
It seems the one sure way to be fully human.  
Think of the trouble — keeping the children fed,  
Keeping your skirt down and your lips red,  
Watching the calendar and the last bus home,  
Being nice to all the dozens of guests in the room;  
Having to change your hairstyle and your name  
At least once; learning to take the blame;  
Keeping your husband faithful and your char.  
And all the things you’re supposed to be grateful for

— Votes and proposals, chocolates and seats in the train —  
Or expert with — typewriter, powderpuff, pen,  
Diaphragm, needle, chequebook, casserole, bed.  
It seems the one sure way to be driven mad.

So why would anyone want to be a woman?  
Would you rather be the hero or the victim?  
Would you rather win, seduce and read the paper,  
Or be beaten, pregnant, and have to lay the table?  
Nothing is free. In order to pay the price  
Isn't it simpler, really, to have no choice?  
Only ill-health, recurring, inevitable,  
Can teach the taste of what it is to be well.  
No man has ever felt his daughter tear  
The flesh he had earlier torn to plant her there.  
Men know the pain of birth by a kind of theory;  
No man has been a protagonist in the story,  
Lying back bleeding, exhausted and in pain,  
Waiting for stitches and sleep and to be alone,  
And listened with tender breasts to the hesitant croak  
At the bedside growing continuous as you wake.  
That is the price. That is what love is worth.  
It will go on twisting your heart like an afterbirth.  
Whether you choose to or not you will pay and pay  
Your whole life long. Nothing on earth is free.

Although it is now more than thirty years since I wrote this poem, I still cannot see it (as I can see much of what I then wrote) with the cool eye of a stranger. There are details that please me about it (the ambiguity of “beaten”, for instance, or the bit beginning “Men know the pain of birth by a kind of theory”) but I fear that my liking for them is not the objective assessment of a critical reader, but the affection of an author. The poem had a modest success in the sixties, and was included in several anthologies, including Philip Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century Verse*. Large numbers of women told me how much they liked it, often adding that they were touched to find that a man had understood them so well. No-one, to my memory, singled out any details in its technique — their favourable response was vague, warm and intense; perhaps that should have warned me.

Twenty years ago I began to realise how much a new generation of women disliked the poem. The sharpest shock came when I gave a poetry reading to one of the many sixth forms I used to go and read to. I said, as I often did, to the teacher who had invited me that I thought everyone would get more out of the occasion if they had read some of my poems beforehand. He replied that they had read ‘A Wish’ and that the girls were very angry about it. When Philip Larkin received a letter from “a girl in Ramsgate” telling him how

disgusting his poems were, he responded “Whoops. The only ones she cited very *very* mild. Thank God she’s in Ramsgate.” Well these girls weren’t in Ramsgate, and Larkin’s ironic detachment was out of my range, so I would have to read the poem — but how? Should I simply read it, without any comment, and then invite responses; or should I introduce it with some explanation? Clearly I ought to do the first, since that is the way to learn something about your poem and its readers; but in this case cowardice prevailed, and I spoke about the poem first. I read them a short poem about a little girl who is frightened by soldiers when a demonstration is taking place, and explained that I was fascinated by victims — by the temptation they must feel to dramatise their situation, and by the way they are often the ones who see things most truly, because they have nothing more to lose. I said that the fact that life had treated me so well made me profoundly grateful that I was not a victim, and yet gave me a kind of envy too. Then I read the poem. The girls listened fascinated, and in the ensuing discussion some of them apologised; they had disliked the poem when they read it, but they now realised that they had misunderstood it.

This was, no doubt, a kind of triumph, yet it also left me with the feeling that I had cheated. I had used my skill and experience as a teacher to give the kind of boost to the poem that no poem is entitled to, at any rate from the author. In that sense the author is dead, and should lie down.

Since the poem was written in 1963, is it fair to judge it by the standards of the 1990s? The question is an obvious one, and perhaps the answer seems obvious too, but it is not an answer I want to hear. Any literary academic is familiar with the argument about timelessness: do poems belong to the time when they were written, or are they for all time? The argument has taken on a more strongly ideological quality since new historicists and cultural materialists have begun attacking the doctrine of the timelessness of great literature as a way of enlisting past literature to defend the status quo. I have taken part in this argument as a professor, writing against what seems to me the cruder forms of historicism, but it is quite a different experience to find oneself not a participant but the very subject of the dispute. The academic discussion tends to see the past as remote and difficult to understand — according to the extreme historicist position, impossible to understand fully. In this case, however, the past in question is recent, perfectly easy to understand, and politically unacceptable.

What happens to the poem in such a situation? Above all, I felt I didn’t want it condescended to. The facts that men no longer stand up in the train for women, that married women no longer have to change their name, do not really matter. The issue is politically charged, but my poem was not merely about politics. (Do I hear a cultural materialist sniffing at the word ‘merely’?) The well-meaning friends who have remarked, in what seem to me the innumerable discussions the poem has provoked, that I could hardly have been expected, in 1963, to foresee the future, were offering the wrong kind of defence. If the poem is read in the 1990s, I wished it to be treated as if it had

been written in the 1990s.

Easier said than done: as I learned when I received from a Quaker, whom I did not know, a poem written in reply to mine. She assumed, rightly, that I would wish to see it, both because of our common membership of the Society of Friends, and because poets, when they are only 'dead', not dead, ought to be shown such things. The poem was called 'Another Wish', and was written in the same loose couplets as mine. It was a plea for marriage as true equality, in which the partners would "share, work and love", and it asserted "I don't need / to paint my lips, or practise tricks in bed"; here is the last section:

This knotty thing of being fully human,  
it's not a question of whether you're man or woman.  
It's about feelings, bearings, — about pain,  
yes — about who has babies, and who's alone.  
But more than that, Professor. It's about  
Who has the final word, who has the clout.  
Surely you can be protagonist  
When I give birth — don't stay below and waste  
your energies in pacing up and down —  
come near, and stay beside — let life detain  
you from your busy-ness — mop my blood  
my breastmilk and my tears. Oh look! — you shed  
tears of your own to mix with mine! That  
is the price: to pause, to weep, to plead, to knit  
your steadfast backbone with the guts of life —  
of life and death. Both you and I must give  
way to the sharp necessity of time:  
there's no easier way to end this game.

But for the moment, back in the world of power —  
I'll be the Prof, and you can be my char.

My children were born in the fifties, when husbands were not allowed to be present during birth. I envy my sons the fact that they have been participants (though not, I must insist, protagonists) in the story; and I love my eldest daughter-in-law for saying that she felt sorry for what her husband had endured watching her in labour, as if that was more important than her own pain. That is not the only thing that has changed, but it is the most important. Do I want it to be ignored, when the poem is read? Obviously, the answer is Yes and No. Can we read the poem as if it was written yesterday, and at the same time refrain from castigating it for its outmoded patriarchal assumptions? I have long claimed, speaking as an academic, that when Portia says to the man she loves and whom she now knows she can marry

But now I was the lord  
 Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,  
 Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,  
 This house, these servants, and this same myself  
 Are yours, my lord's. I give them with this ring.

— we have to read with a double awareness, that on the one hand she is telling us that there was no married women's property act in the 16th century, that a woman lost her fair mansion when she married; and on the other hand that Portia is not complaining, but rejoicing that her love can offer so rich a gift. We read as feminists, and we read as the world that loves a lover, and it must be possible to do both. It is not my place, speaking as a poet, to make the same claim for myself, but I hold to my belief in double reading.

I replied to the author of 'Another Wish', and we exchanged letters with a fair bit of Quaker frankness. I told her that her lines were hostile to what she had found in my poem, and she agreed. Interestingly, she said that the word which had really sparked off her hostility was the word "char". "You want to be a woman," she wrote, "but you don't want to be a humble cleaning woman." I suspect that she disliked the very word "char" ("cleaning woman" is more politically correct), and she admitted that this introduced questions of class power as well as gender power. If it now becomes a political argument, I then make the obvious rejoinder that the two do not always coincide, that plenty of women who employ chars do not want to be humble cleaning women either. But I have been saying that I do not want to engage in the purely political argument, because poems are not merely political gestures. My correspondent revealed her ideological position most clearly when she wrote: "The question of power seems to me crucial at every level of experience. My feeling is that the deepest kind of sharing *will never take place* while unequal power relations exist." This is an ideological statement that must, surely, permeate one's whole way of seeing human relations. It is not merely political, it is the unavoidable overlap between the political and the poetic.

I can now state the difference between us succinctly. It is true that the question of power is crucial, but it is not overriding. It is true that much humanist writing has been marred by its reluctance to recognise the importance of power, but it is equally true that radical discourse can be marred by utopianism. To claim that the deepest kind of sharing *will never take place* while unequal power relations exist (the italics bring the utopianism to the surface) is in one sense irrefutable: that perfect future which has not yet happened may well contain new dimensions of experience. We cannot yet know this, and will probably never know it. But to dismiss the love and the sharing we have because it is all tainted by power is to ignore the distinctions that matter in our imperfect human lives. There is selfish love, there is selfishness disguised as love, and there is comparatively unselfish love, and they all exist while unequal power relations are still with us; to distinguish between them is our most necessary task. And my correspondent, rising above

her ideological limitations, knew this, and said it in her poem. Her vision of the husband mopping her blood and mixing his tears with hers does not have to wait for the future when unequal power relations have been abolished.

My poem does not say all this, and in springing to its defence so abrasively I feel I have bruised it. And am I glad or sorry that I was shown how my words were modified in the guts of the living?