What We Talk About When We Talk about Poetry

Peter Barry

The title of this article is adapted from Haruki Murakami’s *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* (Vintage, 2009), a book about marathon running, ostensibly, but also about writing, reading, and much else. A marathon is a long haul—it is necessary to hit a certain rhythm and then keep going steadily. It takes time and it needs patience, and a ten-minute flash of brilliance won’t count for much in the end. In that sense, it’s like learning to read and enjoy poetry—there is no secret knack that we can impart to our students, and there will always be days when it just seems a chore. But we keep going—the habit keeps us going—and in the longer-term, the rewards can be so great that we can’t feel totally content without doing it. In spite of my title, though, it is perhaps best to avoid talking about poetry whenever possible, and talk instead about poems. In the present case, I talk about six, alternating between long and short, though the long ones are only long when compared with the short ones, which have four, two, and four lines, respectively. The overall purport is to suggest that we should try talking about poems in ways that run counter to the academic norm: to be specific, we should aim to shift our emphasis from the words to the meanings.

I’ll start with Coleridge, whose definition of poetry is probably the one most frequently cited. He says:

I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose = words in their best order; poetry = the best words in their best order.

(Coleridge, *Tabletalk*, 12 July, 1827)
It is such a familiar pronouncement that we probably take it for granted, but I have come to dislike it, and believe it has been detrimental to how we think about poetry and how we teach it. If forced to choose between two bad definitions of poetry, one by Coleridge and one by Wordsworth (the one about poetry being the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, of course), I would choose Wordsworth’s, because at least he focuses on something that poetry is often undeniably about, which is feelings. Coleridge, by contrast, focuses on words. But poetry isn’t about words, it’s about meanings. I would go so far as to say that if you are reading a poem, and you become conscious of the words as words, then the poem isn’t working as it should. The medium of language is a veil so fine we should be able to see right through it. It is fashionable in criticism to say that we must look at the veil, not through it, but doing that is studying poetry, not reading it. Words should be like the launch-gantry of a rocket—they should seem to fall away when the poem attains lift-off and enters its proper element, which is meaning.

The other unsatisfactory aspect of Coleridge’s definition of poetry is its casual denigration of prose, as if prose-writers, by temperament, were happy to settle for less than the best. But the writers of prose fiction routinely achieve things which any poet would surely envy. Think, for instance, of what happens when we read a novel: we enter a world which is a theatre of the mind, and the performance enacts itself within our consciousness. But unlike when we go to the theatre, we are in the performance, not just watching it—we become the person speaking those lines, or thinking those thoughts. So as we read, the medium which is made of words, print and pages dissolves, and then we are reading the novel, not studying it. Much of our teaching produces students who know how to study poetry—and it’s relatively easy to teach them to do that—but don’t know how to read it. So all their study is built upon nothing, since it is about an experience which many of them have never had. Sadly, some of those students go on to become teachers and lecturers, and, in bizarre cases, even poets. The poets are recognisable by their tendency to create intricate, but strangely-hollow, word-skeins—poems built on the Fabergé-egg principle. But that is a topic for another occasion.

Coleridge, then, fixes on the words as such, but there is really no such thing as good, better, and best words. Or, as I once heard a poet say, the only good words are the ones you take out because they aren’t necessary, or because they are show-offy, mot-justey, words that make a poem
sound like poetry’. Words are not the point—they are just a way of getting somewhere else. Often in essays or seminars, students tell us about a couple of words or phrases taken from a poem. For instance, they detect and discuss assonance and alliteration, topics which all my life I have found tedious. The best response is ‘Tell me something about the whole poem, not just about parts of it’. But of the naming of parts in poetry criticism there seems to be no end. It’s a form of ‘critical blazoning’, akin in spirit to those Renaissance poetic ‘blazons’ which catalogued the parts of a woman’s person without ever saying anything much about the person. So students blazon away, with talk of lexical sets, metrical patterns, consonantal rhymes, and so on, all of these having been snipped out from the living form of the poem. This focus on the words as such is technically known as lexical-field discourse, and the focus on meanings as semantic-field discourse. Lexical-field discourse entails an indefinite deferral of close contact with poems, which can be messy and sticky. It pleases the verbally-fastidious, calming the choppiness of the overall effects, and reducing all to plain sailing, as if the poem knew all along where it was going, and had kept all its navigational instruments to hand. But poets themselves often say that if you knew where a poem was going before you began to write it, it wouldn’t be worth writing. I realised recently that talking about poetry is not the same thing as talking about poems. Talk about poetry has to be abstract and summative to some extent, but talk about poems can’t be. To achieve the semantic-field shift of emphasis shift, we need to spend more time talking about the whole poem than about its parts, asking such questions as ‘What is this poem for? Why would the poet have wanted to write it? Why does it begin and end where it does? What is it trying to do? Does it waver or hesitate at any point? Does it double back, or miss its own point, or lose its way or conviction? What effects does it create? And so on. Only in the light of such overall questions about poems can anything about their details make sense.

The first poem, by Christopher Reid (b.1949), was widely reproduced in the British press when Reid’s book, *A Scattering*, which is about the illness and death of his wife Lucinda Gane (1949-2005), won the Costa Book of the Year Award in January 2010. In the week before the announcement of the winner, a poem from each of the short-listed books was read on BBC Radio 4 before eight in the morning. I was still in bed, and half-asleep, when I heard I heard it read out, to great effect:
Late
Late home one night, I found
she was not yet home herself.
So I got into bed and waited
under my blanket mound,
until I heard her come in
and hurry upstairs.
My back was to the door.
Without turning round,
I greeted her, but my voice
made only a hollow, parched-throated
k-, k-, k- sound,
which I could not convert into words
and which, anyway, lacked
the force to carry.
Nonplussed, but not distraught,
I listened to her undress,
then sidle along the far side
of our bed and lift the covers.
Of course, I’d forgotten she’d died.
Adjusting my arm for the usual
cuddle and caress,
I felt mattress and bedboards
welcome her weight
as she rolled and settled towards me,
but, before I caught her,
it was already too late
and she’d wisped clean away.

What, then, can we talk about when we talk about reading this poem? It
produces a strange effect, one which is both uncanny and homely at the
same time, blending those two apparent opposites. But what is the
source of the effect? It comes partly from the position of the crucial
nineteenth line. If we experiment with moving that line elsewhere in the
poem, the effect seems to shift, or even disappear. It is the only sentence
in the poem that has complete optionality of positioning: it could have
been the third line, or the seventh, or the fifteenth, or the last, since it is
not an event in the narrative sequence, but a temporary state of mind (of
forgetting) on which the whole narrative sequence depends. Its
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Poignancy is heightened by using the phrase ‘she’d died’, rather than ‘she was dead’, which seems to indicate the recentness of the death, and how the realisation of its reality is not yet completely taken root in the mind.

On a number of occasions I have tried to make a diagram of the arrangement of the room, showing the relative positions of the door, the bed, the walls, and the sleeper himself, which can ‘generate’ the narrative sequence we are given. Crucial to it, is the fact that nothing is seen—things are heard and felt, or imagined being heard and felt, but all the actions are oddly dislocated from normality. Thus, near the start, there’s a bizarre act of self-burial under a mound (line 4), which seems indicative of deep mourning; there is also a strange act of greeting someone without turning round to look at her (lines 8–9), and a strange swing between extremes which seem to have no middle term (‘Nonplussed, but not distraught’, line 15), seeming to imply that the person actually is distraught. And there’s also the peculiar back-to-frontness of reaching out an arm to cuddle a person without looking at her (lines 20–21). Of course, I have not quite succeeded in cleanly separating the lexical field from the semantic field, since I have certainly mentioned specific words and phrases in what I have just been saying. But I have tried to leave the words where they are in the overall sequence and structure, rather than stripping the poem down to its component parts and removing them from their operating environment. Perhaps it’s like trying to understand how an engine works by watching it working, rather than by dismantling it. Watching the poem at work is like walking alongside it, talking with it as it does what it does, rather than converting it into the usual criticalese (a back formation from ‘journalese’, a term not, of course, coined by journalists). Surprisingly, the word ‘criticalese’ doesn’t exist (at least, not in our critical world), which needn’t stop us using it. Likewise, its non-existence does not prevent Reid using the word ‘wisped’, which he coins by splicing the noun ‘wisp’, for which the *OED* gives as second meaning ‘a small thin person’, with ‘whisk’, ‘[to] move or take [away] suddenly, quickly, and lightly’ (*OED*). Walking alongside the poem is sometimes the best a critic can do. If this poem has a deep-down secret, I haven’t discovered it, and likewise, if there is a hidden art of reading poems lexically, cognitively, deconstructively, and so on, I haven’t found that either. Further, ‘walking alongside’ is a metaphor for not seeking to ‘convert’ the poem into something else, as if it had been encrypted, and we were Bletchley Parkers able to ‘convert into words’ its ‘k-k-k-sounds’, just as our students so over-confidently do with the alliterative or assonantal bits of poems.
We have said a good deal about the first poem, but sometimes anything we say—any kind of talk at all—can seem unnecessary, can seem a verbal supplement which is almost pornographic. I encountered the next poem in newspaper-editor Harold Evans’s autobiography My Paperchase: True Stories of Vanished Times (Little Brown, 2009). It is by Desmond Egan (b. 1936) and is quoted at the end of Evans’s Chapter 9, ‘Divided Loyalties’, which is about the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’. What kind of talk could usefully—or at all—be indulged in after this one?

**The Northern Ireland Question**

two wee girls
were playing tig near a car...

how many counties would you say
are worth their scattered fingers?

Perhaps Seamus Heaney’s advice comes to mind, and should be followed—‘Whatever you say, say nothing’. But I will say something. In some ways, the source of the effect is similar to that of Christopher Reid’s poem, for it too comes from the juxtaposition of the homely (the girls playing) with the uncanny or the grotesque (the primed and planted car-bomb). It also comes from making the reader make the poem, and from the poet’s seeming to keep right out of it. We already know what is in the car, so the poet doesn’t need to tell us. Nor does he condemn it (or need to). Indeed, Egan’s poetry is much weaker when he does explicitly condemn, as if not to do so were to condone. But as Flaubert said of slavery, it isn’t necessary to condemn it—‘just describe it—that’s enough’. So the poem simply asks the reader a question, to which the only conceivable answer is ‘None’—although not really, as somebody must have given the answer ‘Six’, since otherwise such events would never have happened. The same question can be asked of the drones which ‘deliver’ explosives in various parts of the world on our behalf. They are tested in peaceful, contemplative (etc) West Wales, where I live and work. How many scattered fingers, do we think, are worth the political causes they serve?

The third poem is by Denise Riley (born 1948), who, like so many poets today, is also a professor. She is associated with the Cambridge Poets, of whom the best-known male representative is J. H. Prynne. Like them, she specialises in making language behave in unexpected ways, but this is not...
in itself a very difficult thing to do and for many of them it became a somewhat complacent and uncritical habit. Riley, in my view, is the only one who convincingly puts her own language and identity under the microscope too. Shantung is a kind of fabric, a heavy material with a rough, nubby surface, used for making skirts:

**Shantung**

It's true that anyone can fall
in love with anyone at all.
Later, they can't. Ouf, ouf.

How much mascara washes away each day
and internationally, making the blue one black. 5
Come on everybody. Especially you girls.

Each day I think of something about dying.
Does everybody? do they think that, I mean.
My friends! some answers. Gently
unstrap my wristwatch. Lay it face down. 4 10

How might we talk about this poem? If we try, as recommended here, to speak first about the poem as a whole, we might start by saying that the overall effect is one of disjointedness—the term ‘disjunctive poetics’ is sometimes applied to writing of this kind, where a poem seems to make rapid ‘jump-cuts’ in tone or focus. 5 Although the tonal disjointedness is so noticeable it does have a degree of thematic continuity, for the poem seems to be scrolling rapidly through a life (to be specific, a female life), from impressionable youth, to maturity, to aging, and finally to death. There seem to be several different voices in it, as if someone were twisting the dial of a radio and picking up snatches of dialogue from many different speakers and situations. For instance, we hear the tone of an agony aunt in a magazine (‘anyone can fall/ in love with anyone at all’, lines 1-2); then a female amateur philosopher on a bar-stool (‘How much mascara washes away each day?’ , line 4); then, in the middle of the second stanza, an echo of Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth (‘making the blue one black’, line 5), which shadows Lady Macbeth’s line ‘making the green/ one red’ as she tries to wash the blood off her hands; then a snatch of a pop song (‘Come on everybody’, line 6); then the tone of self-mocking irony (‘My friends! some answers’, line 9); and finally there’s a solemn,
funereal tone (‘Gently/ unstrap my wristwatch. Lay it face down’, lines 9-10), replete with a tenderness of self-concern. Perhaps the difficulty of making a coherent overall narrative of any life is dramatized in miniature in this poem. The aim of the Cambridge Poets in drawing attention to language as such is to expose its corruption by political and commercial forces within capitalism. Likewise, deconstruction sought to make us aware of language’s intrinsic instability and unreliability, as if we should all constantly be aware that the slippery linguistic ice we walk on might upend us at any moment, or give way completely. But if we are not to trust language, what medium can we use for communication? T. S. Eliot believed that poetry should perform the function of a linguistic laundry, ‘purify[ing] the dialect of the tribe’, as he put it in *Four Quartets*. This ‘linguistic cleansing’ ideal of poetry isn’t particularly attractive, and I would much prefer my language just as it comes, unrefined by poetic mediation of any kind. But Riley certainly isn’t a linguistic cleanser—rather, she seems to love the slipperiness of the medium that so troubles continental philosophers and literary theorists, and she has written movingly (as a poet and a linguistic philosopher) about the supporting effects in adversity of memory and language.  

The fourth poem is related to the tradition of riddle poems which goes back to Anglo-Saxon times and has parallels in many different cultures. Typically, the riddle silences readers by side-stepping their expectations: like Oedipus, we know that the answer is always something simple and familiar, so much so as to be inconceivable in the circumstances in which the question is put. It is by Paul Durcan (b. 1942) and is in *A Snail in My Prime: New and Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1997):

**‘Aughawall Graveyard’**

Lonely lonely lonely lonely:  
The story with a middle only.

If you could only have one part of your life, perhaps the middle is the part that you would choose, since beginnings are often fraught, and endings painful, so it is puzzling that the poet would claim that having a middle only would be lonelier than having a beginning or an ending only. But he doesn’t say ‘The life with a middle only’, he says ‘The story with a middle only’. If we are talking literally of stories rather than lives, then the matter may be different, for as Aristotle says, a story should begin in the middle (*in media res*), so that the middle actually contains the beginning,
and all that would be missing would be the end, which doesn’t seem too bad. For Anton Chekhov, as short-story writer rather than playwright, the middle is complete and sufficient of itself, for he instructed short-story writers to begin by writing a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end, then take away the beginning and the end, leaving a complete short story (rather than a lonely fragment).

That said (or thought), I felt a residual puzzlement about the poem, so I Googled ‘Aughawall Graveyard’, hoping that some piece of external information might solve the riddle. It turned out to be one of those searches that simply bounce enquirers back to the item they want to know about, for there is no place called Aughawall, and Google searches produce references only to this poem. But at a reading in Queensland in 2007, we learn, the poet said that the piece was composed for his father’s gravesite.

The poem was suggested to me by Kevin De Ornellas of Ulster University, so I asked him if he had any further information. He emailed:

I was intrigued by this Aughawall business and became more intrigued when I found that in Internet land the only references to this proper noun are made in association with Durcan’s poem; such a place name is also absent from Brewer’s [Dictionary of Phrase and Fable] and from a gazetteer I looked at. So, an Irish-specialist colleague and I think that Durcan has invented the proper noun as a sort of generic name for any quiet, western Irish place of reflection and thinking too much. In terms of pronunciation, I would expect the ‘h’ to be basically silent and the ‘wall’ bit to sound more like a soft ‘wal’ as in ‘wally’ rather than a hard ‘wall’ as in the brick structure. So something like ‘Augawal’ might be a good approximation…

Nearly all of that is correct, but a more recent on-line search has yielded more information, and seems to solve the mystery: Durcan is from Westport, County Mayo, in the West of Ireland, for which the burial ground, about a mile from the town, is Aughavale Cemetery. It is called Aughavale Cemetery on the sign at the main entrance, and the townland (the name in Ireland for a parish-sized division of land) is given in lists of
early nineteenth-century fines (imposed for illegal distilling) as Aughawall. A recent (none-Irish) visitor describes the pronunciation as sounding like ‘Uh-wal’. There are three Durcans in the cemetery, Mary (1917-2000), Patrick J (1907-1990), and Theresa (1948-1953), these presumably being the parents and sister of the poet. As the poem first appeared in the 1975 collection *Westport in the Light of Asia Minor*, the poet’s 2007 comment that it was written ‘for his father’s gravesite’ makes sense, as his father was still alive when it was written, and also tacitly acknowledges that after his death the words are not actually inscribed on the family grave. The graveyard also features (as ‘Aughawall cemetery’) in ‘Asylum Seeker’, a longer poem (from the collection *The Art of Life*, Harvill Press, 2004) which vividly illustrates the poet’s intense local affiliations. As often, the shorter the poem, the more talk it seems to require, logically so, since a poem becomes short by exclusions and long by inclusions—so the more the poet says, the less the critic has to. (About *Paradise Lost* there is virtually nothing to say). What is striking in talking about ‘Aughawall Graveyard’ is the strange gap it exhibits between the world of the poem and the rest of the world: the gap is a little smaller than I had thought it was when giving the lecture on which this article is based, but it is all the more disturbing because the two worlds are so closely related without ever clicking neatly together like pieces in a jig-saw puzzle. The effect is akin to what the poet Deryn Rees-Jones, in ‘Grandma in the Garden’, calls ‘the terrible gap between grass/ And sky that the children know,/ That they put in their pictures.’ Thus, ‘Aughawall Graveyard’ nearly exists, but doesn’t quite, and the words of the poem are quite unlike the words placed on gravestones in the real world, including the gravestone of Paul Durcan’s father. Again, then, the overall effect has an element of the uncanny in it, of what is difficult to ‘place’, like the ‘terrible gap’ that Rees-Jones mentions. As often, the process of tracking down what, in criticism, used to be called external data (with the implication that it is really just a distraction) leads to other poems, rather than out into the beyond, and we sense that poems are often in dialogue with other poems, across their own boundaries. In other words, poems (like emails) often draw along with themselves a ‘thread’ or chain of related communications, and this can be another important aspect of what we talk about when we talk about them.

If Aughawall isn’t quite a real place, and isn’t quite made up, then the same is true of the locale of the next poem. This one can be seen as an example of ekphrasis, meaning that it is a poem which gives a
representation of a representation (most often a picture), for it seems to describe a remembered photograph of a family picnic. When the picture is identified in the poem, the ekphrasis is said to be 'closed', and when the presentation is left ambiguous (so that we are unsure whether a real scene is being described, or an image of that scene) then it is said to be ‘open’. But there is also an in-between-state which we might call ‘ajar’, containing elements of both. That is the case in ‘Eden Rock’ by Charles Causley (1917-2003). The link below takes you to the poet’s own performance of the poem, at the end of which he makes the comment ‘Somebody asked me the other day where Eden Rock is—I mean, I have no idea. I made it up. “Dartmoor,” I said—that’s always a safe answer.’ The commentary which follows the poem on the Poetry Archive website describes it as ‘a moving elegy to his parents’, but I don’t believe it is just that:

Eden Rock
They are waiting for me somewhere beyond Eden Rock:
My father, twenty-five, in the same suit
Of Genuine Irish Tweed, his terrier Jack
Still two years old and trembling at his feet.

My mother, twenty-three, in a sprigged dress
Drawn at the waist, ribbon in her straw hat,
Has spread the stiff white cloth over the grass.
Her hair, the colour of wheat, takes on the light.

She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight
From an old H.P. sauce-bottle, a screw
Of paper for a cork; slowly sets out
The same three plates, the tin cups painted blue.

The sky whitens as if lit by three suns.
My mother shades her eyes and looks my way
Over the drifted stream. My father spins
A stone along the water. Leisurely,

They beckon to me from the other bank.
I hear them call, ‘See where the stream-path is!
Crossing is not as hard as you might think.’

I had not thought that it would be like this.
As with the previous poem, the clue might be anywhere—it isn’t guaranteed (in spite of our long-standing critical orthodoxies) that it will necessarily be somewhere within ‘the words on the page’—or in that place alone. ‘Eden Rock’ is the last poem in Causley’s *Collected Poems,* and poems which occupy that position (like Tennyson’s ‘Crossing the Bar’ and Yeats’s ‘Under Ben Bulben’) often contain elements of self-elegy. The poem begins with an over-length ‘odd-line-out’ from the iambic pentameter pattern of the rest, and whenever a poetic pattern is conspicuously broken we sense an urgent semantic pressure being exerted on the lexical frame—‘They are waiting for me’, the poem begins—they (the parents) have already ‘crossed over’ (to another world), in the metaphor the poem enacts, and now comes the moment when he will join them.

Typically, an ekphrastic poem has what might be called a ‘blurred hinge’: it begins by describing the picture, usually with re-assuring literalness, as the first two stanzas do here, presenting a static image of the parents waiting, each in their characteristic form of dress and bearing. Then, in the third stanza, the poem begins to turn perceptibly on the blurred hinge, as the picture seems to come to life, becoming a moving picture, with the mother pouring tea and setting out the picnic things. This seems to draw us into the scene as if we are participating in it, dissolving the ‘language barrier’ (or veil) in the manner mentioned earlier, so that although the phrase used is ‘*my* mother’, our growing identification with the poet (the way we become the participant as we read) shifts the meaning to something different from what it means when somebody making introductions says to us ‘This is my mother’.

If there is something conspicuously disparate about the opening phrase ‘They are waiting for me’, then the same can be said of line 13, ‘The sky whitens as if lit by three suns’—in fact, the parental-elegy reading can only be sustained if we ignore this line, wilfully turning away from its light of three suns. If taken notice of, this line changes the whole effect of the poem, just like Reid’s line about what he had forgotten. If it is describing a death moment, it can only be a death which is sudden, which could surely not have been the case for both his parents. And the parents seem unaffected by it, and continue to fix their attention on the speaker, so that the scene remains otherwise normal. If the speaker is imagining his own death, and what he might imagine seeing at that instant, then the moment makes more sense. Again, it might be useful to follow the clue beyond the words on the page, and into the realm of its intertextual
connections with words on other pages. As a young man, Causley spent six years in the Navy (1940–46) and he wrote poems for dead friends and comrades (such as ‘Song of the Dying Gunner AA1’ and ‘Convoy’), and the ‘Ballad of Jack Cornwell’, which is an ironic celebration of the iconic boy-hero and VC of the naval Battle of Jutland of 1916. In all these, dying is envisaged as a return to childhood, with the mother as the addressee, and it seems plausible to associate the whitened sky of line 13 in ‘Eden Rock’ with the flash of exploding shells at the moment of death in battle. The imagined moment is painless, visionary and easy, and nothing like he had feared (line 20). But the scene presented in such vivid ekphrasis is rendered in fully-drawn detail, being very precise over brand names, materials, details of clothing and so on. The representation seems to hover ‘ajar’ between a picnic recalled from childhood, and etched upon the memory, and the same scene physically captured in a photograph of his parents taken from a viewpoint on the opposite bank. If the poem had indicated unambiguously whether the ekphrasis is a memory or a photograph, it would lose some of its beautifully-calculated visionary poise, and the air of strangeness and suspension would disappear. In talking about this poem, we have (again) merely followed in its wake, so to speak, noting the traces it leaves on other poems and on the intertextual echo-chamber in which—not just its words—but its tones, sentiments, and images seem to reverberate.

The best account I know of the ‘semantic-field’ reading of poems, as described at the start, is Henry James’s recall of his own first reading of Matthew Arnold’s poem ‘The Church of Brou’, which I will draw this piece to a close by citing. I will quote from James, but not from the poem itself. The third and final section of Arnold’s poem, sub-titled ‘The Tomb’, but also published separately as ‘The Tomb Among the Mountains’, imagines the marble effigies of a Duke and Duchess being awakened by the rustle of leaves on the leaden roof of the church above, and by a shaft of moonlight which shines across their upturned (carved) faces. The first two parts (sub-titled ‘The Castle’ and ‘The Church’) are much inferior, but the mesmerising effect of the third part is achieved by a finely-poised mimetic precision, flawlessly maintained across forty five lines. James was so affected by reading the poem that he immediately wished to visit Brou himself one day and see the tomb with his own eyes. He included Brou in his itinerary for the travel book *A Little Tour in France*. The visit was a disappointment—the church (which Arnold himself had never visited) is not in the mountains at all—but the moment is described with uniquely-Jamesian intensity:
All I ever knew of the church of Brou I had gathered, years ago, from Matthew Arnold’s beautiful poem, which bears its name...and as I stood before the object of my pilgrimage...I recalled the spot where I had first read [those lines], and where I read them again and yet again, wondering whether it would ever be my fortune to visit the church of Brou. The spot in question was an armchair in a window which looked out on some cows in a field; and whenever I glanced at the cows it came over me, I scarcely know why, that I should probably never behold the structure reared by the Duchess Margaret...‘So sleep, forever sleep, O princely pair!’ I remembered that line of Matthew Arnold’s...Then there came to me something in regard to the moon shining on winter nights through the cold clere-story.12

It is striking that when James visits the spot, he is immediately transported back to another spot, which is the place where he first read the poem, and he re-lives with nostalgic intensity the moment of readerly transport when the veil of words dissolves and we live momentarily in the theatre of the mind. That spot is an ‘effaced place’, one which seems merely a characterless locale of reading—‘an armchair in a window which looked out on some cows in a field’ [my italics], a place drained of its own particularity by the mesmeric force of the depicted place he is reading about.

But James’s success in recapturing the intensity of his first engagement with the poem is (partly) indicated by his slightly misremembering the exact wording of the lines which prompted it. The line of the poem as James recalled it (and felt no need to check for accuracy) is ‘So sleep, forever sleep, O princely pair!’ This combines the first half of line 16 (‘So sleep, for ever sleep, O marble Pair!’) with the second half of line 1 (‘So rest, for ever rest, O princely Pair!’). Also, it is on autumn, not winter, nights in the poem that the moon ‘through the clere-story windows shines’, so this too is a misquotation (or mis-citation). Indeed, it is frequently the case that our favourite lines of poetry are misquotations, and the errors mark the act of appropriation by which we make the poem, thenceforth, part of ourselves. They mark that shift of gravity away from the lexical field (the actual words) and towards the semantic field (the overall effect of the poem), which is the essence of the kind of reading I
am seeking to recommend. The same emphasis on the overall effect, rather than the actual words, of a poem, is, I believe, also the point of a popular on-line performance piece by the American ‘language poet’ Charles Bernstein. It is called ‘What makes a poem a poem?’ and sub-titled ‘One-minute lecture on poetry’. It can be found at http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bernstein-What_Makes_a_Poem.html.

The fourth poem used here was a short story which contained only a middle: the final poem is a story which has only an end. I heard it read by the poet (Fleur Adcock, b. 1934) about twenty five years ago, and it remained in the mind in its entirety, as short poems sometimes do. I have, however, resisted the temptation to write it out from memory, for the reason just given. Though it has (or is) only an ending, it seems to fulfill the ideal implied throughout this article—that of a poem which requires no talk at all to make its effect. So we can walk alongside it in complete silence:

**At the airport: a story of love**

You walk towards me,
carrying the remains
of our future together—
two drinks on a tray.

**References**

1. This article is a version of a lecture with the same title, given at Senate House, London on 5th October 2013 as part of the English Association’s day-conference ‘All Change at A Level: Looking Forward to the New English Curriculum’

2. The book was published by Areté in 2009. Gane played science teacher Miss Mooney in *Grange Hill* – and was also in *Mapp and Lucia*, *Love for Lydia*, *Casualty*, etc. For an overview of Reid’s work see the following on-line article by Tim Kendall: http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=12270.

3. To hear the poet’s own reading of ‘Shantung’ go here: http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=437

4. She is currently A.D. White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University, USA, and Sessional Lecturer in the Department of History, Classics and Archaeology at Birkbeck University of London.
5. For the concept, see Peter Quartermain’s *Disjunctive Poetics: from Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*, Cambridge UP, 1992.

6. See ‘Denise Riley and the force of bereavement’, by Peter Riley (no relation), at http://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/2012/03/denise-riley-force-bereavement/


