

Sir George Trevelyan: thoughts and writings



The Living Word

from Magic Casements

The secret of good reciting of poems is simple if we will but note it and follow it. Speak only the living thought and refuse absolutely to read dead words. Learn to live solely in the present thought.

If you listen to someone reading or reciting, you will all too often hear that they are being swept on in a desire to read the poem well! The result can be lamentable. Live in the thought. This means that having relished that thought you will pause. The pause between thoughts is the mystery. It is all-important. It may be quite long or it may be very short, but it is absolute. You do this naturally in conversation. Obviously you deliver yourself of a thought and stop – until another thought bubbles up demanding expression. To recite or act is only different in kind. You are speaking not your own thoughts, but someone else's which you must make your own. The moment you are carried away in that terrible drive to 'recite a poem well', nothing will halt you till the last full stop. Listen to a reader. Often a line is followed by an in-sucking of breath. This is absolute proof that the subconscious is *not* living in the present thought, but is obsessed with getting on to the next. To break the habit, the secret is so simple. Having spoken your thought, shut your mouth and allow the lungs gently to refill. Refuse to rush on. Intend only to live in the one thought – then perhaps decide to take yet another thought, and pause again. Try it. This business of shutting your mouth is a way of catching out the unconscious intent. Anxiety will make you breathless at first. Once you have experienced the magic of the 'pregnant pause' you have yourself and your audience in control. Like a good actor, you can do with them what you will. I have *never* heard anyone who pauses too long between thoughts. Broadly speaking, you can afford a surprisingly lengthy pause, for many poems are an essentially meditative experience, and the meaning vibrates and matures and flowers in the silence following the mantric thought. There is at first a natural fear of pausing lest the audience thinks you have broken down. This must be overcome. The tendency for most readers is to take the poem too fast. It is indeed one of the sad illusions that people can grasp and understand a poem at first hearing. This spoils so many recitals, even on B.B.C. A poem is a complex of images stirring the imagination. You must allow time for this process. It is miraculous. I make certain sounds with my voice and in you rises a picture of a spring meadow, a ship, a mountain stream. You cannot stop it, unless you deliberately beat down the rising images with a counter-thought. Sit back and listen, perhaps with closed eyes. A series of linked images forms within you. The inner eye and inner ear are called into action. If, before the picture has fully

formed, I throw in another half-baked thought, it will overwhelm the subtle image as it comes to birth and a painful confusion will result. Learn to relish the lovely process to the full and allow long enough for the image to ripen. Then build upon it the next kindred image until a series of pictures are linked.

Here's another secret of good reading aloud. It takes the listener rather longer to grasp the meaning of a thought than it takes you to read the *next* thought. You have the advantage of the written word, and can at a glance get the coming image. Therefore, having spoken the thought, allow your audience time to enjoy and relish it while you shut your mouth and get the next living thought, refusing to speak another line till you have grasped its content and meaning. Of course this means that the first reading must be in somewhat slow motion. It needs to be, since it is an affectation that one hearing alone can unravel the meaning of a complex sonnet. Do not object that the pause is destroying the rhythm. Rhyme and rhythm are magic. They are the inner life and power of the poem. Often their power is more richly experienced when they span the resonant silence. They continue to vibrate. Do you know that the iambic pentameter, the classical Homeric line, really is founded on the rhythmic relationship of heartbeat and breath – four heartbeats to one breath? This is so powerful that it cannot be killed.

Now let us take this delicate and outwardly simple poem by WALTER de Ia MARE.

'The Song of the Shadows'
*Sweep thy faint strings, musician
With thy long, lean hand;
Downward the starry tapers burn,
Sinks soft the waning sand.
The old hound whimpers, couched in sleep,
The embers smoulder low;
Across the walls the shadows come and go.
Sweep softly thy strings, musician;
The minutes mount to hours.
Frost on the windless casement weaves
A labyrinth of flowers.
Ghosts linger in the darkening air,
Hearken at the open door,
Music has called them, dreaming, home once more.*

Here is a series of twelve distinct images. Let each one come alight in your imagination and allow the inner picture to form. Then link it with the next one and let the one flow into the other, as on a cinema screen. Obviously, the setting is the hall of a medieval castle with a minstrel harpist. Flaying voyaged once through the series, go back to the beginning and build them again more strongly, above all linking one picture with the next. Pictures formed in our imagination are alive. Having integrated them, all you need to do is to start at No. 1 and the whole

series will flow. If you *really* form living images you could know this poem by heart after three readings. And as you live with the images they become enriched. This poem obviously plays on all the feelings of stilling, quietening, dropping towards sleep. Every image and every sound heighten this meditative experience. At first reading, you'll have formed a general picture of candles and the hour-glass. But how rich in feeling is the linked image:

*'Downward the starry tapers burn
Sinks soft the waning sand'!*

Every word gives a new facet to the whole picture and scene you are imagining.

This is indeed a process of exploring a poem, or rather of exploring your own inner senses and becoming aware of their precious gifts. In de la Mare's poem we are concerned with the inner sight and hearing (the harp music, the whimpering of the dog, the sound of the fire).

When this almost meditative ritual of working into the living ideas in a poem is rightly fulfilled, it is a beautiful soul experience. We all know how painful a bad film may be. By compulsion, images enter through the eye and we cannot protect ourselves from them. In our case of listening to the poem, we alone are monitoring the images and creatively forming the inner pictures. The experience is like a kind of melting of the heart centre, particularly if you are reciting and have got control and stillness in the breathing. (How interesting that we call it 'learning by *heart*'). What I have said holds good, even if the poem is a galloping ballad. The pauses must be absolute, even if only paper-thin. Then every thought is alive.

The poems quoted in *Magic Casements* all lend themselves to the approach here outlined. Explore them in this way. Remember to forbid yourself ever to read dead words. Live in the Living Word, the Living Idea. Know that Ideas are indeed alive, for an idea is a thought-being from the eternal ocean of Thought, which chooses to enter the realm of human thinking through your imagination. Do not hurt these living creatures by your crude reception of their gifts. Welcome them home. They are magic casements...

Such poems as these may indeed be *used* for awakening imagination and intuition. As we said at the beginning of this book, poetry is an aspect of initiation into the higher knowledge, involving those faculties which have so often gone dormant in our over-masculinated intellectual age. But often the magic of poetry is lost through careless and thoughtless recital, which has failed to appreciate what is meant by the Living Idea. In our age of spiritual awakening, the Ageless Wisdom appears to be breaking through into our consciousness. It is as if there were an ocean of living wisdom on the ethereal plane beyond time and form. Our lifted thinking and expanded consciousness can begin to tap this reservoir, and channel the archetypal ideas. And they are the stuff of great poetry.

We are avowedly founding our approach on the holistic world-view, which accepts the spiritual nature of man and the universe. When, with this world-picture in mind, we approach the great works of art and literature, they often begin to speak in a new way. We may sense the need for re-interpretation in the light of the spiritual world-view. This is something more than the 'onlooker' approach of academic criticism. It implies a blending with the being and beings within the forms. The symbols in myth and legend, poetry and drama, begin to speak to us, enhancing the meaning of life. Surely in our benighted world this gift is of unparalleled importance. Are we not being invited to a re-exploring of the arts seen as a vehicle for the living spirit, for this surely is what lies behind the creation of the master works? If we can but learn how to read these works aright, shall we not be resonating with the thinking of the initiate-souls who created them? The arts are truly the gateway to spiritual knowledge and should be approached as such. The present volume is an extremely modest attempt at such an approach. It could be followed by others. The rich heritage of English poetry holds so many treasures which we can use for the awakening of consciousness.