

Jean Paira-Pemberton
Université Marc Bloch, Strasbourg II

A POET'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY¹

I came to linguistics late. I remember my first classes in linguistics (which was not recognized as a subject for student study when I was an undergraduate)—it was in Strasbourg and I was shocked to hear that poetry was excluded from this examination of language. This from a linguist who was also a poet. I did understand later that part of the problem is precisely that one has to reduce the scope in order to produce a scientific object and that constantly, having done so, one is obliged to push the frontiers back to include what has been left out. For me, for as long as I can remember, poetry was the most natural, the most typical, above all the most pleasing and useful, use of language. I could think of nothing more normal to be, than a poet. Only little by little did I learn that this was not a general view and that becoming a poet was not as easy as all that. What follows is a little attempt to explain why this was so for me ... Originally I called this a poetical autobiography. Helen Goethals, for the second time, has committed me to that name which, like John Clare, I never dared to claim. So the title stands: "A Poet's Autobiography".

I was born on a 20th May, seventy years ago tomorrow, in a Cheshire farmhouse. This seemed to me a very superior manner of coming into the world, unlike my sister's birth two years later, in Crewe Hospital. I used to meet as a child the midwife "who brought me into the world", as people said. This mysterious function—or connection with myself—of which I had no close picture at all, somehow put her into the category of schoolteachers and vicars, but not of doctors.

My father, who was a man of very few words, wrote to me some forty years later in words I cannot forget: "I walked about the fields waiting for the men to come to work. It was a lovely May morning." The most allusive and

1. The editors would like to plead poetic licence for this paper. In the autobiographical context of a poet recalling influential early reading, when sources are personal and long out-of-date editions of otherwise well-known works, it seemed inappropriate to conform to the usual critical referencing system. Neither did we feel it wise to rectify occasionally approximate quotations, for to do so would have been to destroy the highly interesting evidence of a poet's appropriation of remembered reading. Jean Paira-Pemberton, in between giving papers on modern poetry, linguistics and Lacanian psychoanalytics, is at last beginning to find time to prepare her poems for publication, to the delight of all those who have been privileged to see some of her work in manuscript.

elusive message—the ellipse of the lovely May morning—I think was poetry of a high order in a little-educated man who had to leave school at age fifteen to help his father on the farm in the First World War.

The farm was called Hole House at that time, which I took to refer to one of the deep ponds—the “bottomless pits” of my childhood—that made a hole in the field in front of the house. It is still a farm and the Bradwell Lane has not changed all that much since the 1930s, though a great deal of that country has been devoured by urban spread from Sandbach and the country residences and the over-spill of successful Manchester businessmen. My mother’s father farmed the land adjoining, but the green lane which once led between the two lands from one grandfather’s place to the other’s, has disappeared. As has the mythical Elworth Hall in which my grandfather Richardson lived and where I spent part of my childhood.

My father may have been a good farmer—certainly farming was ingrained in him—but the ‘30s were not good times and he was no businessman. About the time of my sister’s birth he had to sell up and by the time I was three we moved down to Middlesex where my father worked as a farm labourer and we lived in a tied cottage on Dalton’s Farm, at Hayes End. No trace of farm or cottage exists today; no-one would believe that this was still a country lane, cottages with apple orchards and vegetable gardens, the farm with its horses and cows and hay barns where it was delicious to shiver in the dry open doors, watching the rain fall outside.

I remember the house well—three rooms downstairs—a parlour I have no memory of, a dining-room where my mother bathed my sister and me in front of the fire in a zinc tub, the kitchen range with a rag rug on which my father one day put a little kitten, taking it out of his pocket when he came in from the barn. A wooden chest with toys in it acted as a play-pen for my little sister.

We shared a room at the top of the stairs. Our parents’ bedroom was more secret than the spare bedroom immediately next to us. My mother used to stand in the doorway and sing hymns for a lullaby:

Away in a manger,
No crib for a bed,
The little lord Jesus
Lay down his sweet head.

The cattle are lowing,
The baby awakes -
The little lord Jesus
No crying he makes ...

My father’s family, the poor family, were Methodists. My grandfather was a

lay preacher, an uncle, cousins, have been Methodist ministers and preachers; one Pemberton cousin even converted to the Church of England and ended his life, not long ago, a canon of Derby Cathedral. These people must surely have had a certain gift for words—they represented my father's culture.

But my mother's family was Church of England—the Church of the more prosperous—and we were brought up in the Church of England. We went to Church schools all through primary school (apart from a few months in 1940), attended Church and Sunday School on Sundays for most of the time. Other hymns and the Anglican plain chant singing of the psalms supplemented my mother's lullabies. Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley (in spite of John) and a roll-call of the major and minor poets supplied the words:

Time like an ever-rolling stream
Bears all its sons away;
They fly forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

Preceded by:

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone,
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Hymns Ancient and Modern bring me to the *Book of Common Prayer*: the Church of England taught me both music and poetry. Thanks to this education, I lived for as long as I can remember in a world where “the mountains skipped like rams and the little hills like lambs” [Psalm 114]. Isaac Watts is an echo:

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past and as a watch in the night. Thou carriest them away as a flood; they are as a sleep; in the morning they are like the grass which groweth up.

In the morning it flourisheth and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down and withereth. [Psalm 90.]

And this is taken up by the carol:

O fair, O fair Jerusalem,
When shall I come to thee?
When shall my sorrows have an end,
The joy that I may see ...

The life of man is but a span
And cut down in its flower;
We are here today, and tomorrow are gone,
The creatures of an hour.

Which leads to Shakespeare—but that will come later—his “Hey nonino,
How that life was but a flower. In spring-time, the only pretty ring-time” of
As You Like It.

Of the Psalms what does one remember:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he maketh me down to lie in green
pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters [...]

Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.
[Psalm 23.]

Breyten Breytenbach in prison remembered these words and wrote a poem
contradicting them but rejoicing in a letter from his wife. What the Psalms call
God is still active in the breath of the world of freedom love brought to him.
Or this:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.
My help cometh even from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.
He will not suffer thy foot to be moved; he that keepeth thee will not slumber.
Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep ... [Psalm 121.]
The sea is his and he made it. (Psalm 95)

Or this, which I have sung in so many settings since:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept when we remem-
bered Zion.
We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
For they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they that
wasted us required of us mirth saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land. [Psalm 137.]

In a strange land—“I am a stranger here in Gloucestershire.”

Always between two lands at every stage of my life, how could these
words not echo? And not the meaning only, for the meaning changes, but the
words, their rhythm, the way they are put together, the way they weave their
echoes back and forward to make a rich and enduring tapestry.

The versions I have quoted come from the King James Bible. The *Book
of Common Prayer* was also put together at a time when, as Katherine White-
horn once memorably said, “even a Committee could write good rhythmical
prose”. And its rhythms remain in us even after the meaning has lost all sense
in a world that is no longer Christian. My copy was given me on May 20th,
1941: “To Jean, with love from Aunties Marion and Beatrice”, two of my
grandmother's spinster sisters.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things that we ought to have done; and we have done those things that we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us ...

And the reply:

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live.

Then shall be said or sung this Psalm; [...] The sea is his and he made it.

Saint Paul says: It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But the Commination (that one reads in private, for no longer used) is terrible, terrifying:

For now is the axe put unto the root of the trees, so that every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire [...]

The day of the Lord cometh as a thief in the night and when men say Peace and all things are safe, then shall sudden destruction come upon them as sorrow cometh upon a woman travailing with child and they shall not escape.

Incredibly apt in times when the V-bomb, when Hitler's bombs, played the part of God.

The war came into this world when on 1st September, 1939, two days before the declaration of war on 3rd September, my mother sent my sister and me back to our grandfather's Elworth Hall for safety. We travelled in the care of the guard, which was exciting, for we really were in the guard's room surrounded by luggage and parcels. We arrived at Crewe Station into chaos. No message had reached our uncle of our arrival. With our big dolls in our arms we ran up and down the railway footbridge. A policeman gave us a shilling to buy sandwiches with, and eventually our uncle Ted was brought to reception us and take us back to the farm: in his car, if you please. Cars were still a rare luxury; it must have been the first time we had actually ridden in one—smelling of wood and leather in those days.

Unfortunately our mother decided things were safe and brought us back to Middlesex—till a bomb fell on our school sometime about my ninth birthday, putting it out of action though hurting no-one. Evacuation had become official. We returned to Sandbach, but rather unhappily not to my grandfather's farm, but to those two maiden aunts Marion and Beatrice, whose understanding of children was minimal. They were kind in their way, but we were lonely and driven more than ever to words, to books, and poetry, and make-believe for consolation. However, the farm was still only a shortish walk away. We would take the green lane between the two farms: where I had

been born on the one hand, the other where my mother had lived as a young girl—to be comforted by our grandfather's grossly overweight, warm-hearted, wide-lapped and brusquely commonsensical housekeeper: our auntie Boughey.

I won a scholarship to Crewe County Secondary School, one of the two local grammar schools, a half-hour bus ride away. One year I had to recite in front of the whole school from Tennyson's "Morte d'Arthur":

And slowly answered Arthur from the barge:
'The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
and God fulfills Himself in many ways, lest one good custom should corrupt
the world.
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?'

I would end here nowadays but my memory carries me on and the words are still alive, the rhythm again imposes its inevitability:

I have lived my life and that which I have done
May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
If thou shouldst never see my face again
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats,
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those that call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

Strange words to put into a child's mouth at the age of eleven or twelve ... but yet they contain in germ so many met with later: Hamlet to Horatio—

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than dreamt of in your philosophy.

Even the words of Auden:

As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade
To all the noises that my garden made
It seemed to me only proper that words
Should be withheld from vegetables and birds [...]

We too make noises when we laugh and weep:
Words are for those with promises to keep.

Or Ted Hughes's "Honey Bee" (I feel I owe it to some people here to quote Ted Hughes with approval!):

The honey bee
Brilliant as Einstein's idea

Can't be taught a thing.
Like the sun, she's on course forever.

For me this last line is absolutely memorable. I wonder: if Tennyson set me on course forever in my investigations into the language of humans—what makes us human: not prayer, but the words we pray with.

In the third form I won a prize and was allowed to choose my books. I chose a book on astronomy by Sir James Jeans (this has disappeared from my library) and *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (which has not). I was thirteen. With this, a whole range of poetry became available. From Anon.:

Western wind, when will you blow
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And in my bed again!

More Tennyson: "The Lotus Eaters". I even remember the disposition or the turn of a page, throwing into relief the words:

And in the stream the long-leaved flowers weep,
And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in sleep.

And that near-anonymous William Cory:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And the romantic Yeats: "But I being poor [...] tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

Fear no more the heat of the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy wordly task hast done
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney sweepers, come to dust.

The *Oxford Book of English Verse* does not tell us where these songs come from—and in fact I did not find *Cymbeline's Fidele* till later.

But Shakespeare: these were the years of introduction: Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* first, on a par with *Tales of Greek or Scandanavian Heroes*. Then the plays. My sister and I playing to each other, for each other, against each other, the great quarrel scene in *Julius Caesar*. There is no way to do justice to the gradual discovery, so instead I'll read Janet Frame, pp. 113-114 in *Forces under Water* :

I had been allowed to keep my pink cretonne bag. I took it with me wherever I

went, and it was soiled now with crumbs of old cake stuck under the cardboard base and stickings of honey on the inside. I had a copy of Shakespeare its pages thin like tissue paper and the print packed small and black and seeming wet like perpetually new footprints on the beach preserved against the obsessive shiftings of the tide. I seldom read my book yet it became more and more dilapidated physically, with pictures falling out and pages unleafing as if an unknown person were devoting time to studying it. This evidence of secret reading gave me a feeling of gratitude. It seemed as if the book understood how things were and aged to be company for me and to breathe, even without my opening it, an overwhelming dignity of riches; but because, after all, the first passion of books is to read, it had decided to read itself; which explained the gradual falling out of the pages. Yet at night, in the shuttered and locked room where I now slept and there was no light to read by, I would remember and say to myself, thinking of the people of Lawn Lodge, and the desperate seasons of their lives,

*Poor naked wretches whereso'er you are
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these.*

And I thought of the confusion of people, like Gloucester, being led near the cliffs,

*Methinks the ground is even.
Horrible steep ...
Hark, do you hear the sea?*

And over and over in my mind I saw King Lear wandering on the moor and I remembered the old men at Cliffhaven sitting outside their dreary ward, and nobody at home, not in themselves or anywhere.

And how not to think forward once again to Gerald Manley Hopkins—soon to come:

*O the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall
Frightful, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who never hung there.*

Shakespeare, curiously, brings me back to the Bible. Preparing for what was then called Higher School Certificate I was asked at school to comment on “Fear no more the heat of the sun” which, at that point, I did not know, and compare it with a poem by Housman, which I did. I began by preferring Housman (I cannot now remember which poem!), slowly shifting to the realisation of the far greater quality of the other. But I still remember how delighted I had been to learn afterwards that it was by no less than Shakespeare.

But equally vivid in my mind is a commentary we were also asked to do on another (also unnamed) poetical text. This time I found myself trying to explain the fascination for me of this almost totally incomprehensible text:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain;

In the days when the keepers of the house shall tremble and the strong men shall bow themselves and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened;

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home and the mourners go about the streets.

Now, of course, I do know what these metaphors might “mean”, having read Chouraqui's Bible. The fascination of the mysterious remains.

The war ended and we returned to Middlesex. In my last year at school I discovered Catullus:

*Nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux
Nox est perpetua una dormienda.
For us when once our brief light has set
Perpetual night is ours for sleeping.*

Which we read impressively out on the lawns of my new school with—at last—a young teacher back from the war.

And a wonderful English teacher, an old lady, opened up both poetry and theatre. She took us to see Olivier in *King Lear* and Robert Speight in one of the first post-war performances of *Murder in the Cathedral*. I grappled with *The Waste Land*. My copy of Eliot is one of the first books I bought with my own money, my scholarship money, when I went up to university. “Ash Wednesday”:

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree.
In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety
On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained
In the hollow round of my skull. And God said
Shall these bones live? [...]
And the bones sang chirping
With the burden of the grasshopper, saying

Lady of silences
Calm and distressed [...]
End of the endless
Journey to no end

Conclusion of all that
Is inconclusible
Speech without word and
Word of no speech
Grace to the Mother
For the garden
Where all love ends.

This is entering a new world where all the possibilities (including my own) were at last opening up. But before I conclude on this, one last book remains: *Metaphysical Poetry: Donne to Butler*. This is inscribed “Jean Pemberton. July 1948. In memory of English, Dramatic and Literary Society work.” and signed C.Hill, Miss Cecilia Hill, my English teacher. I was going up to University with Donne, Vaughan, Marvell and George Herbert as viaticum:

Easter Wings

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
O let me rise as larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Affliction should advance the flight in me. George Herbert, preparing for what came next: Gerald Manley Hopkins.

The leaden echo and the golden echo
(maidens' song from St. Winefred's Well)

The leaden echo

How to k  ep—is there   ny any, is there none such, nowhere
known some, bow or brooch or braid or l  ce, latch or
catch or key to keep
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty ... from vanishing
away?

[...]
 No there's none, there's none, O no there's none,
 Nor can you long be, what you are now, called fair,
 Do what you may do, what, do what you may,
 And wisdom is early to despair:
 Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done
 [...]
 So be beginning, be beginning to despair.
 O there's none; no no no there's none:
 Be beginning to despair, to despair,
 Despair, despair, despair, despair.

The golden echo

Spare!
 There is one, yes I have one
 [...]
 Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks, maiden gear,
 gallantry and gaiety and grace,
 Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks, loose
 locks, long locks, lovelocks, gaygear, going gallant, girlgrace -
 Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with
 breath,
 And with sighs soaring, soaring sighs deliver
 Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long before
 death
 Give beauty back, beauty, beauty beauty, back to God, beauty's
 self and beauty's giver.
 See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair
 Is, hair of the head, numbered.
 Nay, what we had lighthanded left in surly the mere mould
 Will have waked and have waxed and have walked with the wind
 what while we slept,
 This side, that side hurling a heavyheaded hundredfold
 What while we, while we slumbered.
 O then, weary then why' should we tread? O why are we so
 haggard at the heart, so care-coiled, care-killed, so fagged,
 so fashed, so cogged, so cumbered,
 When the thing so freely for'feit is kept with fonder a care,
 Fonder a care kept than than we could have kept it, kept
 Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer, fonder
 A care kept—here kept? Do but tell us where kept, where. —
 Yonder. —What high as that! We follow, now we follow. -
 Yonder, yes yonder, yonder,
 Yonder.

As I think back over all this, I cannot help being struck by the overwhelming fact that almost all of this is religious poetry, which for the non-Christian I have become, and the non-believer I think I already was, is rather strange.

Of course, this comes of following the links from one text to another and one could imagine another, no doubt equally truthful, concatenation,

through nursery rhymes, for instance, to Lewis Carroll, from traditional (national) songs to Donne's "Exstasie" and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. Yet I don't think this parallel path would stray very far from the theme.

For that was the ground which for me made metaphor possible. Not only possible but inevitable, the only language we have, to come back to those last things that we cannot escape, from birth and love to death, the allusive, the oblique, the echoing of the last vibrations of a bell into the silence we look for.

It also occurs to me that this celebration of words is also a celebration of books—the things themselves: signed, written in, annotated, dust-covered, brown-speckled and sometimes worm-eaten, reminding us of where we got them, read them and with whom.

I hope this new generation will not have lost the pleasure we of our generation have in constantly returning to them, picking them out from their known places on our shelves. Love is not too trite, nor too strong a word, for what we feel.