

(Apologies if this is all somewhat familiar to you – the original poem is fairly well known... but... there is always room for further ‘takes’!)

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

Wallace Stevens_1879 – 1955

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?

Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

This poem comes from ‘Harmonium’, Wallace Stevens’ first collection of poems – a total bombshell of a publication that came out in America in 1922, the same year as Eliot’s ‘The Wasteland’. The poems couldn’t have been more ‘modernist’ – in the sense that just as Picasso, jazz, Le Corbusier, *The Rite of Spring* and the *Ballets Russes* seem to confound all conventional conceptions of the genres they are working in, so these utterly peculiar poems startle with their *oddity*. Take this exhilarating example of the poet’s extravagantly phrased claim to create the very universe (through poetry) in which he finds himself.

Tea at the Palaz of Hoon

Wallace Stevens,

Not less because in purple I descended
The western day through what you called
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.



The mythical ‘Hoon’ seems like an ancient prophet, creating in a loneliness, that he doesn’t seem to accept as such, the world about him. The ultimate paradox seems to be that he is not just ‘creating’ the world through words, but, as an artist, he is also creating *himself* in the process. Ironies abound, including the banal idea of taking tea at the “palaz” while the poet, in the persona of ‘Hoon’, descends from the heavens to *create* the world. As a tea drinker myself, this, of course, seems actually

quite reasonable. As for the “you”, much is written elsewhere about Nietzsche and Hegel, for Stevens *is* a self-consciously philosophical poet; I prefer, however, to read “you” as referring to me, the reader, and the “I” inevitably refers back to the poet. We are on the same journey and, presumably, both here in the “palaz” sharing a cuppa!

In a somewhat similar fashion, ‘Thirteen Ways’ ironically explodes the idea, first of all, that we can have a single, unitary way of visualising or conceiving of things. It also, like ‘Tea At the Palaz of Hoon’, suggests (with “the blackbird is involved In what I know”) that our consciousness of reality is mediated by art. In other words, crudely speaking, I could be aware of a blackbird through my ears and eyes, but it takes *art* to make me realise imaginatively the fuller significances of blackbirds. In a sense, this is a modernist ‘riff’ on the subject of blackbirds and our (or more specifically this poet’s) consciousness of them (and of everything else in the universe). Roland Barthes and his “La Mort de l’Auteur” would be perfectly at home with the ideas here; we, as readers, have to re-create in our own heads the text that seems to have come adrift from the author. There is no fixed point of reference to hang on to. This makes for interesting (and probably divergent) readings. Let’s see where we go!

Thirteen is, as we know, an unlucky number, and black, traditionally, is an unlucky colour. The poem is set in snow – beautiful yet also cold, white and deathly. The word ‘gnomic’ comes to mind as I read: pithy aphorisms deliberately ambiguous, unsettlingly oblique. Like looking at an abstract painting, it might be best to let the suggestions flow over you without worrying too much about ‘meaning’.

The thirteen short sections – all containing the word ‘blackbird’ - are set in a lonely landscape of snow, mountains and autumn winds. There are positive assertions - with some irony, like “A man and a woman and a blackbird Are one” - that we all perhaps share the same world. There are hints (“innuendoes”?) that knowledge of *anything* is complex but that here we are measuring everything in relation to a living being, beautiful, natural, who has a particularly wondrous voice (like poetry itself). The poet himself is ‘involved’ in this landscape - with particular references to Haddam and Connecticut. Haddam was about 30 miles from Hartford, where Wallace Stevens lived.

III (no.3) seems to suggest that life is a “pantomime”. Nothing else in the poem supports this idea of the world being a “pantomime”, something which is linked to art, but an absurd, childish art – social, but of little consequence. Elsewhere, the tone is sombre and reflective, VI, for example, hinting at frigid solitude with ‘icicles’ like “barbaric glass”. Glass appears elsewhere, in the “glass coach”. Glass is transparent, making things visible, but here much is hinted at but left *invisible*. Is the poet in a glass coach to see, or be seen? Glass can shatter and its shards can do damage. Positive or negative? Unlike the “thin men” of Haddam, who prefer golden birds, the poet is wrestling with the beauty and the “shadow” of the more ordinary, at times even

sinisterly so, “blackbird” with its beautiful voice and its own short riffs of sound that are so hard for humans to attempt to interpret.

X (no. 10) is ambiguous (like so much of the poem) in that “flying in a green light” might be the beauty of the bird and its surroundings, but its song may also cause the “bawds of euphony” (a lovely phrase, which I take to refer to those Philistines who need art to be utterly sweet and sugary) to cry out sharply. Art is not always sweet or easy to interpret.

XII (no.12) draws our attention to the lack of movement in the poem, apart from the swirling wind and a journey in a glass coach. It does so by inverting our perception of movement and turning it to the point of view of a bird.

The ambiguous life force of the blackbird is, I find, finally set against a rather hope-less, wintry and static human perspective. The end of the poem in XIII (no.13) suggests a resigned weariness (“It was evening all afternoon. It was snowing And it was going to snow.”) – a dull (?) acceptance of solitude and “winter”. Against this the blackbird finally just sits “In the cedar-limbs.” It is part of this “pantomime”, part of the poet’s imaginative world, but at the same time it is very much apart. “The blackbird is involved In what I know” is a declaration that is at once haunting and elusive. On one level, of course, the bird is obviously *not* “involved”, in the ordinary sense, but it obviously *is* also entwined in the poet’s thinking and consciousness of the world in another ‘artistic’ way.

I like the poem ending with the bird sitting in the “cedar-limbs”. Limbs link trees to humans and the blackbird is thus linked to the human world. These are word-paintings, sketches that allude rather than affirm (though there are plenty of seeming affirmations in the poem); they nudge us towards ideas with scattered phrases that fly in the cold winds of an autumn evening with winter drawing in.

This is a very well-known poem, but for me it remains persistently elusive and beautifully oblique: *gnomic*. I once showed it to a class of eleven-year olds, thinking they might be put off. Not a bit! They were bursting with ideas and inspiration, all choosing later to write their own “Thirteen Ways of Looking at...Something” in the same fashion (just as R.S. Thomas has done below).

Each time I read it I notice something new or it touches different nerves – I’m sure this will be true of all readers, who will see in it completely different things. Even the title needs consideration. This is not ‘*all*’ blackbirds but ‘*a*’ blackbird. What difference does *that* make, if any? Like a good abstract painting, this poem calls for us to review how we *look* at things and calls for us to consider ‘looking’ from new perspectives.

Now let us see how R.S. Thomas, the Welsh (and rather dour) clergyman poet has had fun (as my eleven-year olds did) using the poem as a springboard for his own ‘take’ on ‘looking’.

Thirteen Blackbirds Look at a Man

R.S. Thomas

1

It is calm.
It is as though
we lived in a garden
that had not yet arrived
at the knowledge of
good and evil.
But there is a man in it.

2

There will be
rain falling vertically
from an indifferent
sky. There will stare out
from behind its
bars the face of the man
who is not enjoying it.

3

Nothing higher
than a blackberry
bush. As the sun comes up
fresh, what is the darkness
stretching from horizon
to horizon? It is the shadow
here of the forked man.

4

We have eaten
the blackberries and spat out
the seeds, but they lie
glittering like the eyes of a man.

5

After we have stopped
singing, the garden is disturbed
by echoes; it is
the man whistling, expecting
everything to come to him.

6

We wipe our beaks
on the branches
wasting the dawn's
jewellery to get rid
of the taste of a man.

7

Nevertheless,
which is not the case
with a man, our
bills give us no trouble.

8

Who said the
number was unlucky?
It was a man, who,
trying to pass us,
had his licence endorsed
thirteen times.

9

In the cool
of the day the garden
seems given over
to blackbirds. Yet
we know also that somewhere
there is a man in hiding.

10

To us there are
eggs and there are
blackbirds. But there is the man,
too, trying without feathers
to incubate a solution.

11

We spread our
wings, reticulating
our air-space. A man stands
under us and worries
at his ability to do the same.

12

When night comes
like a visitor
from outer space
we stop our ears
lest we should hear tell
of the man in the moon.

13

Summer is
at an end. The migrants
depart. When they return
in spring to the garden,
will there be a man among them?

On a simple level we can see that R.S. Thomas has ‘fallen man’ (“the forked man” – cf ‘*King Lear*’ and Edgar as ‘Mad Tom’) in his cross-hairs. And, of course from a blackbird’s point of view, fair enough! Man *is* the enemy of the natural world these days. R.S. Thomas might just be banging on about unredeemed man and how Christianity will make it all right. It looks that way.

What I find mildly exhilarating in this poem, however, is the discovery that Thomas *does* actually have a sense of humour – something I had not expected from nearly all his other poems. For example, in a poem called ‘The Survivor’ – where you might immediately expect some sympathy for a “survivor” – it turns out that the “survivor” in question is a very old, complacent, uncaring, unthinking Welsh farmer sitting on his own in a pub. He has spent his many years “beating black and blue” the land, “warped inside/ And given to watching, sullen-eyed,/ Love still-born”. These are hard judgements. The farmer sits alone in a corner before the fire, with nothing left to dream on but the self-delusions of his past. Thomas wants to “Wake him up...” so that he can repent of the crimes he has committed against the land and against his long-suffering wife. Because he is “The Survivor,” as the poem is entitled, the man has the chance to face facts and to gain some kind of redemption:

“Old and weak, he must chew now
The cud of prayer and be taught how
From hard hearts huge tears are wrung.”

Thomas is right, I think, but there is some surprise that a clergyman would seem to be so ready to exact penitence! Elsewhere, he can be far more compassionate, as in ‘*Evans*’.

Evans

Evans? Yes, many a time
I came down his bare flight
Of stairs into the gaunt kitchen
With its wood fire, where crickets sang
Accompaniment to the black kettle’s
Whine, and so into the cold
Dark to smother in the thick tide
Of night that drifted about the walls
Of his stark farm on the hill ridge.

It was not the dark filling my eyes
And mouth appalled me; not even the drip
Of rain like blood from the one tree
Weather-tortured. It was the dark
Silting the veins of that sick man
I left stranded upon the vast
And lonely shore of his bleak bed.

BY R. S. THOMAS (From *Poetry for Supper* 1958)

Thomas chooses to write in a skewed sonnet that doesn’t rhyme, as if rhyme would be too sweet an option. The physical darkness of the first section, with all its “bleak” details is echoed by a moral darkness – of loneliness and despair) in the second section. Thomas, by

the word “stranded”, seems to be hinting at his own guilt in leaving the sick man to die alone, even though he visited the man “many a time”.

So, we can see that there aren’t many jokes in Thomas’s poetry! Now compare the tone of:

7
Nevertheless,
which is not the case
with a man, our
bills give us no trouble.

or,

8
Who said the
number was unlucky?
It was a man, who,
trying to pass us,
had his licence endorsed
thirteen times.

Thomas is quite rightly having fun, for what is poetry if not a complex game with words? The whole poem, if we come back to the idea of subversion (and poetry as a subversive activity), is a perfectly enjoyable subversion of the Stevens poem. However, I would argue that it adds no fresh insights and merely delights in another series of riffs on ‘unredeemed man’s’ low place in the scheme of things. Perhaps I’m being unfair here, for man, let’s face it, IS pretty bad, and the poem has fun in light-heartedly pointing this out. Nevertheless, I feel that coming from a respected poet (as opposed to my clever 11-year olds), Thomas doesn’t pay Stevens sufficient respect or homage in addressing the philosophical points that Stevens was trying to make in quite a serious way.

I may be being too harsh here, for there *is* a respect in the fact that Thomas’s poem is so closely aligned to Stevens’s. The original poem is by now so well known that Thomas can parody it in the sure knowledge that the joke will be well understood. Perhaps it is Thomas’s ‘down’ on man that I instinctively react against – the protestant kill-joy, nit-picking attitude that sees humans as having fallen so far short of their moral potential. Perhaps, also, it was going to a Methodist school that has warped my judgement here! I nevertheless like the fact that Thomas can enjoy following in Stevens’s footsteps. Poetry is a continuing ‘tradition’, as Eliot was keen to point out in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, and poets, like painters (think of Manet’s “Olympia”, inspired by Titian's Venus of Urbino, which in turn refers to Giorgione's Sleeping Venus), bounce off each other in interestingly appreciative and subversive ways.

Floreat *subversion* - always!

And here below, just for the hell of it, is a British poet, Peter Redgrove, with his ‘take’ on the old master! Like R.S. Thomas, jokes abound; such parodies are, I suppose, a sort of reverence.

September 2018

(See following page...)

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard

By Peter Redgrave

I

The blackboard is clean.
The master must be coming.

II

The vigilant mosquito bites on a rising pitch.
The light has gone out.
The chalk whistles over the blackboard.

III

Among twenty silent children
The only moving thing
Is the white finger.

IV

O young white cricketers,
Aching for the greensward,
Do you not see how my moving hand
Whitens the black board?

V

A man and a child
Are one.
And man and a child and a blackboard
Are three.

VI

Some wield their sticks of chalk
Like torches in dark rooms.
I make up my blackboard
Like the face of an actor.

VII

I was of three minds
Like a room
In which there are three blackboards.

VIII

I dream.
I am an albino.

IX

I wake.
I forget a word.
The chalk snaps on the blackboard.

X

Twenty silent children
Staring at the blackboard.
On one wall of each of twenty nurseries

XI

He ambles among the white rocks of Dover,
Crushing pebbles with black boots.
He is a small blackboard
Writing on chalk.

XII

It is the Christmas holidays.
The white snow lies in the long black branches.
The blackboard
In the silent schoolroom
Perches on two stubby branches.

XIII

The flesh that is white
Wastes over the bones that are chalk,
Both in the day
And through the black night.