Seeing and Saying

Kathleen McPhilemy explores the poet's twofold task of seeing and saying and how the 'I' relates to the 'eye'.

'See it, say it, sorted' is the slogan which confronts every rail passenger, whether in the station or on the train. This annoying and endlessly reiterated message could be redeployed as a description of the role of the poet, whose job it is to look in order to *see* then write in order to *say,* as clearly as possible, what they think is going on in the world. Any sortedness, however, is always only momentary, a temporary epiphany, a brief resting place from where the seeing and the saying must start all over again.

The primary meaning of *see* is to have the physical power of sight, to exercise the visual sense. Many of the poems we value most are cherished for the vividness with which they convey a visual image. John Clare, for example, bases his description of the yellowhammer's eggs on closely observed visual detail which gives validity to the image he develops:

> 'Five eggs pen-scribbled over lilac shells
> Resembling writing scrawls, which fancy reads
> As nature's poesy and pastoral spells;'

The accuracy of observation is a strong foundation for a simile going beyond the physical, perhaps in an allusion to the Romantic idea of nature as the primal language, or perhaps in a reference to himself, the peasant or 'natural' poet. The poem goes on to consider the evils that may befall the yellowhammer's nest, again based on observed fact but reminding us of the scourge of enclosure which overshadowed Clare's poetry and his life.

> 'A noisome weed that burthens every soil,
> For snakes are known with chill and deadly coil
> To watch such nests and seize the helpless young
> And like as though the plague became a guest
> Leaving a houseless home a ruined nest.'

The 'houseless home a ruined nest' conjures up the deserted villages left in the wake of enclosures and the Industrial Revolution.

However, the need for a poet to see does not imply that s/he should be possessed of particularly acute eyesight. Homer, whether there was one, two or none of him, according to legend, was blind; so was the famous poet, Antony Raftery, the eighteenth century wandering Irish bard; so was Milton; so indeed was the late John Heath-Stubbs.

Seeing can be construed as paying attention, maintaining awareness, being open to perception. This brings in also the idea of the poet as a witness, someone who sees what is going on and is ready to bear witness, to *say* what has been seen. What is seen can have a smaller or wider range; it may seem local to the poet, personal or limited in reference; on the other hand, it may be overtly political. It is the way that it is said that makes it a poem rather than a piece of journalism or propaganda.

Emily Dickinson was one of the most private of poets, who led a life restricted in travel and acquaintance, from choice as much as because of the time she lived in. Nevertheless, she can witness major events and her own feelings in a way which her readers can recognise and

understand, as when she writes 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes'. She goes on to describe the aftermath of terrible suffering, whether mental or physical:

> 'This is the Hour of Lead –
> Remembered, if outlived,
> As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
> First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –'

Auden, who was a much more obviously public poet, observed and spoke for many in 'September 1st, 1939' about the outbreak of war, from his location 'in one of the dives/On Fifty-second Street.' Auden felt considerable ambivalence about this poem in later years and attempted to suppress it. Famously, he ridiculed the famous line: 'We must love one another or die', declaring 'That's a damn lie! We must die anyway.' Nevertheless, this poem managed to see both fear and hope and to say it in such a way that people would have recourse to it long after the particular occasion for which it was written; in particular, it was often cited following 9/11.

> 'Defenceless under the night
> Our world in stupor lies;
> Yet, dotted everywhere,
> Ironic points of light
> Flash out wherever the Just
> Exchange their messages:'

Hedged by equivocation though it is, the conclusion of Auden's poem suggests both the possibility of 'the just' and of communication, even at the worst of times. The poem continues to speak to us in different times, in different contexts, even though it issued from a particular individual *seeing* in a particular place.

This brings me to the question of the 'I' and the 'eye', homophones in English, which have given rise to many puns and much speculation. Whatever the poet writes is mediated through their own perceptions. Back to Emily Dickinson:

> 'The Robin's my criterion for Tune –
> Because I grew – where Robins do –
> But, were I Cuckoo born –
> I'd swear by him –'

Dickinson is explaining that her poetic vision and style are moulded by her surroundings: 'I see New Englandly'. (Incidentally, the American robin is bigger than the European one and belongs to the thrush family.) We might say that all poems are, at root, first person, no matter how much the writer struggles to escape this subjectivity. This point was argued by the Irish poet, Sinéad Morrissey, in her 2018 StAnza Lecture published in *PN Review* 250:

> 'No matter how much we may long to escape the tyrannies of an 'I'-inflected consciousness, we can't, because everything we do is expressive of our core nature: our physical demeanour, our clothes, our handwriting, and especially the words that come out of our head, and which we place, in our chosen order, on a white page.'

The discussion of the use of 'I' or the first person in poetry stems from an increasing distrust, or at least uneasiness, going back to the beginning of the last century. There are a number of contributory factors, not necessarily clearly connected. The desire to escape subjectivity can probably be traced back to the Imagists and their demand for the 'direct treatment of the 'thing''; to William Carlos Williams' mantra 'No ideas but in things' and to the ideas of the American objectivists, such as Oppen and Zukovsky. These poets did not claim to escape the 'I' but sought to be as objective as they could in their perceptions of the world. A similar idea may be inferred from Christopher Isherwood's declaration on the first page of *Goodbye to Berlin,* 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.' Clearly, this stance is an unrealisable aspiration: the point of view is always personal; there is always someone pointing the camera.

As well as the desire to be 'objective', which may also be linked to the rise of science and scientific methodology, there have been more recent attacks on the poetic 'I'. Critical theory embraced the idea of the death of the author: the view that the writer's intention and life are irrelevant to readers and that the work must be read as a product of culture, or socio-economic infrastructure or of language itself. These ideas, whether derived from Marxism, structuralism or post-structuralism, deprive the author of intention and identity and render the 'I' irrelevant.

For some poets this has resulted in a retreat away from the world and into language, the production of randomised texts, erasure texts, texts based on the application of curious rules,

such as `Oulippo' poems. These works either present themselves as abstract art works, which evade any representational significance, or throw the entire burden of interpretation on the reader. Although some of the poems that result from this kind of stance are highly crafted and often visually or aurally appealing, they seem to me to have the same disadvantages as much concept art: the underlying philosophy is interesting, the effort is considerable but the appeal is often limited to those who are pursuing the same ideas and who may well be located in the more remote eyries of the academy.

Another reason for distrust of the 'I' is advanced by a more recent generation of poets, who may include those writing in post-colonial and LGBTQ contexts. They perceive the traditional lyrical 'I' as white, male and coercive. For example,

> 'About twenty years ago
> Two girls came in where I worked –
> A bosomy English rose
> And her friend in specs I could talk to.'

Wild Oats by Philip Larkin

all the way back to:

> 'An hundred years should go to praise
> Thine Eyes, and on thy Forehead Gaze.
> Two hundred to adore each Breast:'

To His Coy Mistress by Andrew Marvell

or even, from one of my favourite poems:

> 'Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
> Before, behind, between, above, below.
> O my America! my new-found-land,
> My kingdom, safeliest when with one man mann'd,
> My Mine of precious stones, My Empirie,
> How blest am I in this discovering thee!
> To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
> Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.'

Elegie: to his Mistris Going to Bed by John Donne

For some contemporary writers their identity is fluid; they may be non-binary in gender, of mixed heritage or English speaking from colonial backgrounds. For the writers anthologised in a recent collection *Wretched Strangers,* edited by Àgnes Lehóczky and J.T. Welsch, the sense of identity conferred by rootedness, belonging to one place, does not exist. They may see themselves as outsiders, or perpetually 'between', as being what one writer called 'transplace'. Consequently, the eye that sees and what it sees may be experienced as particularly unstable.

There are a number of ways to respond to this. For Vahni Capildeo, a poet who describes herself as Trinidadian-Scottish and, more recently, 'they', one path was to map her place in the world through her poems, so that her belongingness becomes a vector rather than a point. This can be seen in her collection, *Venus as a Bear,* where the titles of the poems are matched to different parts of the world where she has been. Another strategy she adopts is to take on the voice of others, often the voice of those who have not been able to speak for themselves. In the title prose poem, she describes her recognition in the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich of the role and plight of the cabin boys in Nelson's era: 'There a dedicated chapel full of marble caramel, salted with statues of at-risk youth, the trafficked, the fanatics, then known as cabin boys'. After this seeing and saying, she gives the boy a voice: 'Oh yes, I love the Lord. The Lord, he is well spoken. He wipes his nose on cambric; I wipe mine on my sleeve.'

There is always the risk of overweening appropriation in speaking for others, although it is a risk which novelists and dramatists are compelled to take. In this poem, however, Capildeo first acknowledges that she is speaking from the 'I', saying what she has seen before using the voice of the cabin boy as a figure for commenting on her perception.

The notion of submerging an individual identity by taking on the voices of others might remind us of Keats, who describes himself as a 'chameleon poet' as distinct from what he called Wordsworth's 'egotistical sublime':

> A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity – he is continually in for, and filling, some other body…

Letter to Richard Woodhouse, Tuesday, 27 October, 1818

Whatever Keats meant by this, and, like many of his other enigmatic insights, it remained undeveloped, his poems, whether they create characters like *Endymion* or *The Eve of St*

Agnes or are written from his own 'I', like the odes and the sonnets, still say what he has seen and are expressive of his vision. By *vision,* I mean a particular poet's way of seeing and saying, not some kind of divine or mystical experience. A poet's vision will be unitary insofar as it is held together by the poet's life, but it will not be static or unchanging. Keats had two attempts to write about Hyperion: the first was apparently abandoned when he realised it was Miltonic pastiche and when he was also overwhelmed by the experience of nursing his brother, Tom. He then looked at the poem again and completely recast it, in the form of a vision or dream where, in the first canto he meets the goddess Moneta. He uses this encounter to dramatise his argument with himself about the role of the poet. The goddess instructs him:

'None can usurp this height…
But those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest.'

Keats struggles with his failure to be a man of action. When he describes himself as among those who 'feel the giant agony of the world; And more, like slaves to poor humanity,/ Labour for mortal good', the goddess castigates him again: 'They are no dreamers weak…/What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,/To the great world? Thou art a dreaming thing'. ' On further questioning, the goddess distinguishes between dreamers and true poets: 'The poet and the dreamer are distinct/Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes,/ The one pours out a balm upon the world,/The other vexes it.'

Encouraged by Moneta, Keats determines to see truly, whatever the cost:

'... I set myself
Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see,
And seeing ne'er forget.'

The vision Keats describes does not come simply from looking out, but also from looking in. This process of introspection can be painful, as it was for Keats: the poet has to explore the inadequacies and limitations of his or her own (or their) bounded 'I', the 'I' from which they will look and see and say the world.

A poet's vision, a poet's style, a poet's voice: all of these derive from the poet's self. None of them is static. The self is never entirely discontinuous, although it certainly changes. We are held together by our own memories and the perceptions of others. Dinah Livingstone, editor of this magazine, and a poet who with rigorous awareness uses her own eyes to express her vision, says:

'I knew that I was me when I was five,
I'm grown up now and not a little girl
but still myself, though I don't look the same.'

'Keeping Faith' from *Embodiment,* 2019.

I believe that the self is continuous, social and responsible. I am responsible for my actions, what I do today, what I did yesterday and what I may have done years ago. As a poet, I am not a politician, a doctor, a community worker; my role is to see the world with as clear a vision as I can, and part of that seeing is to see myself as clearly as I can, so that I can write or speak with an awareness of my own subjectivity. Seeing clearly is hard and painful; it involves seeing what is bad as well as what is good, being open to 'the giant agony of the world', open to other voices and open to one's own inadequacies. Saying is equally difficult. Keats may have said that poetry should come as naturally as the leaves to the tree, but we have recognised how he wrestled with the function of poetry and the poet and how he revised and rethought his poems.

T S Eliot wished to separate the man who suffers from the mind which creates, but in his work we understand how what he saw and how he saw it become the material of his poetry. Eliot was not writing about himself but he was writing out of himself, in the belief that what he wrote would have meaning for others. When he says at the end of *The Waste Land*, 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' he was writing personally, but also in the expectation that what he wrote would be recognised by many others in the post-war society of 1922. The poet sees it, says it and the sortedness is achieved in the moment of the poem, shared with the reader or listener; but the sortedness is never final or complete. The poet must move on to keep up, keep on looking, keep on seeing, keep on saying.

Kathleen McPhilemy's poetry collections include *The Lion in the Forest* (2004) and *A Tented Peace* (1995) both from Katabasis (London).