

STANDING STILL AND WALKING IN STRATH NETHY

An Interview with Thomas A Clark

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‘The question occurs to me – and quite seriously – how many shoe soles, how many ox-hide soles Alighieri wore out in the course of his poetic work, wandering about on the goat paths of Italy. The *Inferno* and especially the *Purgatorio* glorify the human gait, the measure and rhythm of walking, the foot and its shape. The step, linked to the breathing and saturated with thought: this Dante understands is the beginning of prosody...’

Osip Mandelstam, *The Noises of Time*,
trans. by Clarence Brown

Can you explain the way in which the practice of walking has come to be an important aspect of your poetry in recent years?

I suppose that essentially it gives me a time in parenthesis, a contemplative time, when contemporary pressures are kept outside the brackets so to speak, so that there can be concentration on a few primary concerns. It’s an adventure. You walk out of your usual context, into a more open relation with things. Hopefully, you arrive at a clarity, an immediacy of perception, and you lend attention to that, stay with whatever is happening, internally as well as externally, instead of being displaced into the past or future, instead of being caught up in an attitude.

In walking you should travel light, carry as little as possible. It’s a simplification of the kind used in philosophy or science. By a process of distancing, or selecting, you mark out an area of enquiry. It seems to be the case that as you leave behind your everyday consciousness you come closer to things, to natural objects and their particular ways of being, as well as to your own adequacy or inadequacy in dealing with time and identity in the absence of all the little entertainments, the imaginary conversations we conduct with ourselves. There is a certain moment, perhaps three or four days out, when gross perceptions are replaced by finer ones.

This brings to mind various literary and artistic precedents – the Wordsworthian, the work of artists such as Richard Long or Hamish Fulton. Would you explain a little how these precedents influence you, and perhaps where you differ from them?

Well, you could be extreme and say that the cultural baggage that is left behind on the walk is the whole of the Western inheritance. I certainly think something like that is attempted in the work of Hamish and Richard. There is an assumption that the Western project, humanist and rational, has led to a devaluation and exploitation of the natural world and to a divorce of thought and feeling. These artists are trying to recapture the immediacy of their own senses. It was a problem for my generation, the first to grow up under the threat of total war and the first to be generally aware of the word ‘ecology’, to go on making art without adding to a discredited tradition. People began to look east, or to indigenous cultures that had managed to live on the land without raping it. The attitude was one of respect, for native peoples and for the earth, and that still seems to me one of the great, if largely unremarked, gifts of this movement. It was a brief achievement which was rapidly engulfed in the universal cynicism.

It’s interesting that, of the precedents you mention, the artists are contemporary and the poet is two centuries old! Sadly, few poets of my generation have tackled these issues. If the artists have managed to walk away from their parent culture, I’ve been guilty of more than a glance over my shoulder. For me access to the hills has been through a pastoral landscape. But it might just be that, if your medium is words, there has to be some accommodation of philology and history.

The rhythm of the walk – I'm thinking here of Gary Snyder's rip-rapping, a physical activity shaping the words – describe the effect of this on your poetry...

I'm not really sure that the rhythm of walking gets into the poems much at all, any more than the political issues I've consciously excluded. In a sense, my poems are more about standing still than about walking. The walking is really only to bring me to that point. Poetry is an art of movement and time which I'm always trying to hold back or stop, or to tease into stillness and patience. That is why so many of my poems are short, so they can be taken in at a glance almost, as a painting is present all at one moment. In longer poems, the line always tends towards self-sufficiency, to function as a unit, as if it is reluctant to run on into the next line. The flow of syntax is complicated, diverted, delayed. A model encounter in my poetry might be between a man and a stone: there is no rhythm to that. Whenever a rhythm starts to establish itself in my work, it is usually broken. In poems with short lines, the rhythm might be a controlled breathing, so as not to disturb a bird or a deer.

In the walk, are you composing as it unfolds, or is it more a question of recollection?

Most poems are thinking back to particularly lucid moments in the landscape, or to images that are worked again and again, although notes are often taken *sur le motif*, like an old landscape painter's way of working. But there are some poems where the idea is to be faithful to the first impulse, to put oneself on the spot, in both sense of the phrase. Examples of that would be the European walks in *Tormentil & Bleached Bones*, where each line consists of a note taken at the time of the walk. It's one way to retain vivacity of impressions.

It's important to realise that both the poems and the walks are in answer to a movement of desire – for clear air, silence, responsiveness, in the midst of a life, no different from anybody's life, in which these are largely absent. I must say I'm completely puzzled by the inability of some people to see this desire in the poems. Literary intellectuals in particular are quite blinded by the absences in my poems. It's as if you can't mention a hill unless you have access to it by way of a street, unless you mention the acid rain that falls on it, that it has an absentee landlord, and so on. For them, nature is problematic and can only be located, if at all, by way of a critique of culture. But I would maintain that we can't begin to know ourselves except in relation to everything that is not ourselves. It's in order to focus on this relation that so much is excluded from my work. Anyway, there are plenty of writers who are sharp and penetrating in denunciation of a pretty dreadful condition: my impulse is to discover and to celebrate.

Can you describe some of the places you've visited, and why they were chosen?

I don't think the places particularly matter to the reader and to be more specific about them would be misleading. I'm not involved in a kind of 'travel writing'. It's not an invitation for the reader to actually go to Coire Fhionn Lochan, for instance. That would be just tourism or voyeurism. The meaning of the poem can only be grasped in relation to the poem, not by going somewhere in the landscape to see for yourself. Even where the place is named, as in the poem set in Andalucia, it's just a way of setting the scene generally, so that you don't think you're in the Scottish Highlands! A further problem is that place names are too historically or socially determined for my purpose, too tied to habitation, which doesn't necessarily have a precise relation to the terrain. I'm more concerned with, on the one hand, a geological or geographical spread, a landscape, or on the other hand, with a much smaller sense of place, a place in a hedge, or under a rock.

These are not wilderness landscapes such as Hamish Fulton often chooses...

First of all, I must say that the Scottish landscape is more important to me than any other, and I need to return to it again and again. I feel at home in the highlands and islands, in a deeper sense than I do anywhere else. It's quite beyond any personal control or allegiance, simply an accident of birth rather than a nationalism. But if I get off the train at Crianlarich, for instance, there is an immediate ease and pleasure, a recognition, as if I'm about my proper business.

If I go walking abroad, it's usually somewhere cheap and accessible. Those are the determining factors – the fact that I don't have a lot of money! I don't really think that the

notion of wilderness has much importance for me, except in the sense of an otherness I'd be cautious of intruding upon. And I'm suspicious of the exoticism of wilderness, which in our culture so quickly translates into entertainment. I don't want the wild places of the earth to exist for my entertainment. The athleticism and competitiveness which attaches itself to the idea of walking nowadays, pushing everything to extremes, is also something I'd want to dissociate myself from. It's another form of disrespect. You're in the country yet you don't have enough time or humility to linger by a tree. Those who enter into competition with the landscape have a habit of winning and that kind of triumphalism and ego-building is utterly conventional. The way that many people need to see themselves as bigger than a mountain just appals me!

A lot of material for my writing comes from daily walking in the hills and fields around my house in Gloucestershire. If you are open enough and quiet enough, there should be enough scope in an ordinary field to last a very long time. As I've already said, it's not a question of walking but of being where you are, of standing still.

To ask a more basic question, why is landscape so important?

It's no more important than human relations, than me talking to you, for instance, but it is the condition of these relations, it is our home, and as such we don't give it nearly enough attention. But there is something else. We are not really symmetrical creatures, not complete and self-enclosed. We are situated in the world, facing in a certain direction. Whatever way we turn, we open out, blossom almost, into everything that lies before us. That's our true inheritance, one that is outside any culture, east or west, and that crosses every historical period. Everything that's behind us, so to speak, that's invisible and internal, is vital and real, but it lives or shrivels according to how we relate to everything that is in front of us, to how we respond to that possibility.

I was struck, when I read your poem sequence 'The Castles Of The Good (In the land of the Cathars)' – aware as I was that you may have been led there by your reading of Simone Weil, for whom the Albigensian heresy meant so much – and, as I noticed all that you were refusing to address in terms of the historical tragedy of the place, nevertheless lines such as 'the castle on the pierced rock/ breath held above a sheer drop' hold a strong resonance.

Although I knew a little about the Cathars, it was actually an old book of photographs that made me want to go there, together with a certain romance I've always felt about the name Languedoc. The sites are truly spectacular, jagged extensions of the cliff face, but maybe more to do with the Templars than the Cathars, who apparently used them as sanctuaries in times of persecution. History does get into that poem, in lines such as 'the field where the faithful burned', but I'm not a historian. My interest was in being there and not in any kind of reconstruction. When I went it was the thaw, there were days of blue skies, and the flowers and butterflies were out. The history is present in the same way, as part of the being of the place. It's not just something that's in the past.

Many of the Cathars were shepherds and nomads involved in the transhumance, the seasonal migrations, so that's also an underpinning of the poem. Actually they are an example of the sort of thing I was referring to when I said that I still want to glance back at the West. They were inward, democratic, pastoralist. We should do them the justice of realising that the rational, hierarchical, progressive flow of Western history was not unchallenged.

*Where does the notion of the Scottish voice lie in all this? It's obviously something you've had to confront. And how about Gaelic culture? I know you are a reader of the *Carmina Gaedelica*...*

When you hear about the Cathars, and particularly when you visit the places associated with them, you feel that it concerns you. You recognise part of yourself. I have the same feeling, but stronger, on the islands, or in reading the *Carmina Gaedelica*, or Kenneth Jackson's wonderful book *A Celtic Miscellany*. Those cultures represent ways that we did not go. It's made very clear in Bede's History, for instance, how decisions were implemented in favour of the Roman rather than the Celtic Church. I don't know what that means in theological terms, but you recognise the old problem of authority being elsewhere.

I honestly don't know what this has to do with voice. Obviously, I use the English language, and I'd like to think that my writing is in the grain of the material I use. Beyond that, voice must involve some sense of being embodied, of speaking from where you are and who you are. If some of us, at least, are disenchanting with the dominant culture, with the way it has blighted the planet and blighted individual lives, then it may be that the beginning of an answer is in the local. By local I mean not only a small area but an immediate area, what is to hand, what in terms of nature and culture is available, to a community or a person. I'm more interested in that than the national, which 'Scottish voice' would imply.

How aware are you of having tempered a tendency, natural and cultural, to project moral issues onto the relation with landscape?

We are always involved with projection. There is no value-free science, for instance, and it's a commonplace of contemporary theory that the observer affects the observed. All the same, it would be easy to reach for that argument too quickly, and, however impossible, I'd always want to attempt to see things in themselves, from their side, to take *le parti pri des choses*. We should understand that land and plants and animals exist and enjoy themselves before any meaning they have for us. Even from our side, it's necessary to our own survival that we start to appreciate the non-human world. There's a kind of insanity in not being able to see a tree, or feel the stillness around a tree.

But the survival argument is one of expediency, whereas the assertion that animals and plants and even minerals have rights is a moral one. It's one job that poetry can do, to widen our sympathies to include these things, and there's so much pleasure in that. Really, I can't believe that people still think they can arrange everything to suit themselves, and don't see what a loss of enjoyment that entails. Some of the earliest Irish and Scottish poems in Kenneth Jackson's book are full of particulars. They celebrate the life around them. The locality is not just a resource – it's an enlargement.

The main impulse of your poems is celebratory and yet I see that the word 'hurt' occurs quite frequently, though never as something elaborated upon in personal terms...

I hurt, you hurt, we hurt. If you walk for any distance, you are likely to get blisters, you may be carrying around a personal anguish which prevents you from seeing what's in front of you, you may at any moment come across something fairly disturbing. I began by saying that I wanted to concentrate on a certain area, to exclude more obvious areas of contemporary concern, but that doesn't mean you stop being human. On the contrary, the whole direction of my work is outwards, towards something, and that involves a necessary unguardedness and vulnerability...

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