

The Middle Distance: A Reflection on Craft and Art

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Abstract

In *The Breaking of Style* Helen Vendler examines the point in three poets' careers when a radical departure from an established style occurs, often in response to a crisis or a change in orientation to art and life. For me the moment of rupture or reversal occurred with the act of migration. From movement and departure, my work has gravitated to a poetic of return and homecoming. The essay attempts to identify this moment of change, and also traces the threads of continuity, the abiding influences from my beginnings as a writer, and which are continuing to shape my emigrant life and work.

Keywords

Creative Writing, migration, memory, poetry, identity, Singapore

In his *Paris Review* interview, Robert Lowell says:

I'm sure that writing isn't a craft, that is, something for which you learn the skills and go on turning out. It must come from some deep impulse, deep inspiration. That can't be taught, it can't be what you use in teaching.
(Seidel)

Seamus Heaney also makes a distinction between craft, which for him is "the skill of making," and technique, which "involves not only a poet's way with words" but also "a definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality" (*Preoccupations* 47). It is a lesson that comes back to the writer in middle age, when he has acquired or developed the points of craft that have gone to make up a recognisable style and voice. He discovers that what Lowell calls "deep impulse, deep inspiration" rarely comes and that he has to search harder for it.

With each writing class I teach, the question stares at me with its implacable face. Over and over I have gone through the same drill, reiterated all the tenets of writing, drilled into the predominantly indifferent ranks of students the fundamentals of good writing courtesy of Chekhov, Hemingway,

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Carver and so on. As I wade through the pile of portfolios at the end of the semester, the questions pile up hour by painful hour: Can writing be taught? What is preferable, craft or art? Is honesty, sincerity better than cunning and craft, if you can't have both? Or is Oscar Wilde right in saying: "A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal" (1048). I was brimming with sincerity when I set out to be a poet, after my first encounter with "To Autumn," and the verses I wrote then were not much better than some of the sentiment-sodden and cliché-ridden workshop efforts that I face each week. In assessing the portfolios I remind myself to respect the individual behind the writing, and appreciate the emotion and idea, even if the execution is flawed or badly conceived, the craft inadequate or altogether missing. A few times I have wondered if I would have survived such writing courses. Would it have hastened my development as a writer and enhanced my knowledge of the craft? Or would it have done irreparable damage to my art, my sense of mission and vision of how to live poetry, and of how poetry and life should feed each other?

Waiting for the miracle to happen, when the art and craft start to meet in the workshop, I wonder about the first time I experienced the sense of arrival. I had started writing for a few years before serving in the army at the age of eighteen, but it was imitation stuff, feeble clichéd efforts that would not stand up in the workshop. For two and a half years of national service poetry went in hiding; it simply had no place in the endless tedium of drill, forced marching and battle exercises. Ironically, when I started writing again a year or two after being discharged, it was my army experiences that nudged the art and craft into cohesion. I remember the thrill, the feeling of arrival as I wrote out a poem about training in Taiwan and my buddy sharing his last cigarette in the pelting rain. It bought into focus my feelings about the two and a half years of soldiering, friendship, and about how the army has shaped me, turned me into a writer who grounds his work in experience, a poet for whom poetry is experience relived or revisited at a deeper level. A spate of army poems started flowing and one arrived quite complete, the first time I experienced Robert Frost's touchstone of what poetry is: "A complete poem is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words" (84). The poem is about trench-digging, and I found myself digging with ease back to one of the low points in army training — digging a trench in pouring rain:

..... As
the butchering blade glances
off the stubborn rock,
and the brutal recoil troubles
both land and sky, I know
that bunkers and trenches
are not ready-made

for heroes to leap into,
 and when daybreak concludes
 both night and this mock war,
 and I shall have perished
 from an observer's lethal finger,
 there will be earth enough
 to bury two and a half years in. (*Somewhere-Bound* 33)

Years later, I recognised in its digging trope and movement subterranean connections to Seamus Heaney's "Digging" and Edward Thomas' poems. More of this shortly.

One of the oft-repeated tenets in Creative Writing is "Write what you know." But it is hard to know what we know and any writing that assumes prior knowledge is hardly worth writing at all. The "deepest impulse," to use Lowell's words again, comes from the desire to find out what knows us, what we have lived through. One of the most rewarding exercises in the workshop is to get the students digging into their past, especially childhood. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke counsels: "And even if you found yourself in some prison, whose walls let in none of the world's sounds – wouldn't you still have your childhood, that jewel beyond all price, that treasure house of memories?" (8). Childhood exercises unfailingly strike a chord in class, especially among older students. You sense something starts to reverberate, to sing, and the craft and art begin to fuse, and you share the elation as students discover, or rather recover something that they thought lost, a moment, an object, a memory. When this happens you get the feeling that it is as much the students as you yourself who are the recipients of whatever knowledge is being imparted in the workshop. In teaching, the lesson often circles back to the teacher; I suspect that it is the teacher who learns most what is being taught in class. In my workshops this has happened a few times in sessions focussed on childhood and on recovering beginnings. Eliot's words "And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time" (222) have become a workshop mantra, and with repetition a truism, but then writing is often not so much about shunning platitudes as learning to penetrate beneath these everyday truths and learn their truths at a personal level. In any case, it is difficult not to practise what you teach. Perhaps it is also a middle-age reflex, to look back, the creative and remembering radar pivoting towards the story you have left behind, to that first half of your life, to the raw unrevised first drafts, fast furious versions that seem unconnected, waiting across the gap that emigration has opened up between where you were and where you now find yourself.

To an adult migrant, half his life is finished, half the story completed in his country of birth, and the dreams that he has in his new country are often a replay of memories of his pre-emigrant self, his childhood and youth in the old country which seems frozen in time. I am aware of the pitfalls of nostalgia and

caution my writing students against any sentimental indulgence, but I cannot resist the Antaeus reflex to reconnect with the earth I grew up on. In “Hercules and Antaeus” Seamus Heaney has Antaeus, the “mould-hugger,” lifted skyward into “a dream of loss/ and origins” by Hercules (76). In an Ireland riven by sectarian conflict, this wrestling trope represents fraught binaries and oppositions, among which is that between the displacement and being grounded. To find his strength again, Antaeus has to touch the earth. Heaney admits: “I don’t think you ever find the balance, no. It’s a deeply satisfactory paradigm for any sentient being. You’re caught between one thing and another, and that’s the whole vigour and collision. I think in my own case, I’m basically Antaeus” (Maclellan). The binaries can be painful to straddle but they can also create a dynamo of energy and inspiration. And these binaries are especially pronounced and vital in the case of those who have chosen emigration, expatriation or exile.

Heaney was one of the tutelary voices I discovered when I was about sixteen, in the British Council Library next to the Change Alley, on the ground floor of the Rubber House, which was raised a few feet above the street level outside. The streetside windows looked out on to a ceaseless parade of office workers, and across the busy thoroughfare of Shenton Way, to the Modernist articulated façade of the Clifford Pier and the boats riding at anchor in the harbour. It was a small library but it held a small cache of books that wrought a turning point in my life. Heaney was in *Eleven British Poets* edited by Michael Schmidt, young and emerging among older poets like Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, Geoffrey Hill and R.S. Thomas. At this point he did not seize my attention as much as Jennings or Larkin, but “Digging” made a deep impression that would make me return to Heaney later. Something about the organic movement of thought in the poem, the attentiveness to the sense and sounds of experience and memory, the way the poem, to use Heaney’s own words, “moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament” (*Preoccupations* 56). It is an early rite-of-passage poem, but in it the technique is already maturing; the ground and aquifer of Heaney’s work during the Troubles and beyond has already been formed.

For me the experience of reading Heaney and the other poets held in the British Council Library became firmly grounded in place, the reading memory inextricably bound up with the specifics of the circumstance in which I read the books. The literature section was housed next to the window just a few feet away from the entrance to the Change Alley. I would sit in the armchair in the corner, with the literature shelves next to me, and pore over poems that were often beyond my analytical skills to apprehend, but whose music I was enthralled by. The British Council Library became a home from home for me, a place of refuge, a place where a door to a vastly different world had been

opened. The books it held became my bulwark against the racket of mahjong tiles at home and a nation obsessed with material progress, against the gathering tide of changes about to envelope the whole country.

In a sunken floor furthest from the street was a listening section catering primarily to students from English language classes on the upper levels, but there were recordings of Vaughan Williams, Elgar and Mahler, and Argo recordings of poetry and drama, stack of LPs that hardly anyone listened to. I took these out and had the librarians play them for me. I must have worn their patience and the vinyl grooves out. Over and over I listened to Eliot's incantatory reading of "The Four Quartets"; I was entranced by Dylan Thomas intoning his poems and loved James Mason's interpretation of Housman. But above all I coveted the recording of Edward Thomas read by Richard Pasco. I had seen Richard Pasco as Brutus in the BBC production of *Julius Caesar* screened in the basement theatre below the library, and had fallen in love with his gentle, pensive, melancholy and mellifluous voice, pitch-perfect for Thomas. The poems from another epoch and clime, soaked in the English country scents and colours, had me in thrall; something ineffable was happening, an almost non-verbal meaning immersing me in a country of the spirit. Although Thomas' poems roam the countryside and are redolent of the peaceful sounds and smells, there is a restive spirit, an itinerant, untethered self that spoke to and perhaps fed my own sense of displacement. They breathed an unappeasable yearning; their intoxicating mixture of loss, longing and peace became the music that shaped my own ear. "Roads" and "The Lane" drew me in with their ineluctable cadences, and the lines were soundtrack to my own walk around the Change Alley, their beat accompanying my steps on the pavement and a stretch of cobbled walk in the Raffles Place. Somehow they soothed the unrest in me, and yielded what Frost calls "a momentary stay against confusion" (132). Although the poems' topographical referents were totally foreign to one growing up in the tropics, the landscape and place-names mesmerised me with familiar echoes and promise of repose and home. "Adlestrop" entranced me with its sounds, or rather, its silence, the scene so vividly captured with spare visual and auditory detail:

Yes. I remember Adlestrop –
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June. (51)

The poem captures a neither-here-nor-there place or an in-between moment that I can identify with much more now as a migrant, a suspended state, neither arrival nor departure, that I have felt and tried to evoke in my travel memoir *Between Stations* and poems I have written since emigrating. With his

characteristically gentle and hesitant voice, Thomas listens to the intimations of the landscape and shares this moment of surrender and almost-epiphany.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. (51)

But the poem that captivated me most was “Old Man.” After “To Autumn” it is the second most important poem which has wrought a deep impact on me as a reader and writer. Like Keats’ ode it is steeped in sensory experience, imbued with scents, essences that convey the meaning or heart of the experience better than words. Keats’ ode illustrates his notion of negative capability, the poem searching, feeling from image to image, discovering or uncovering as it proceeds a season’s insights, a life rich in store, until it culminates in a moment of fortitude and knowledge. Frost once said that he never knew which way the poem was going to turn out; he asserted: “No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader” (132). More than either Keats or Frost, Thomas’ work enacts this intuitive process. With a Thomas poem, you surrender to its hesitations, its faltering moment, its slow steps and meandering thought-shifts, the uncertain “I” and his sad voice, until you come to the liminal point that is neither arrival nor departure, a deep sad knowledge that touches you in your bone.

“Old Man” tantalised me with its whiff of some secret, a whisper of an entry into an ineffable state of loss or bliss. Just thinking of it I can see the father and daughter standing by the shrubbery, and hear Richard Pasco’s voice, slightly trembling with love, tenderness and loss. The poem is quite wholly immersed in the moment, and refrains from chasing the mystery of the experience. The third strophe to me is one of the most potent lyric moments in English poetry:

As for myself,
Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.
I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,
Always in vain. I cannot like the scent,
Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,
With no meaning, than this bitter one.

I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can, remember:
No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush

Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
 Neither father and mother, nor any playmate;
 Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end. (36-37)

The poem puzzled me, drew me in with its inexorably sad music and image at the end. The word “remember” occurs twice; along with “home” and “peace” it is the most recurrent word in Thomas’ poems. Memory, home and peace, they too have become part of my poetic lexicon and compass. With its syntactical shifts and quiet music, its moment of loss and half-hearted effort to stem the sense of loss with memory, the poem echoed my sense of uncertainty, seventeen, lonely, bewildered by a love for what I could not name.

I would stay till the library closed just before eight, and then stand peering into the dim length of the Alley, quiet now, the stalls all boarded up, and only a Sikh watchman sitting on his *charpoy* near the entrance. I could see my father and me, five or six then, browsing the stalls, our walk slowed to a crawl. He had not yet disappeared out of our lives and the Alley was his favourite haunt. I remember the bus trip to Clifford Pier, the tang of salt air coming off the harbour, and the walk across the pedestrian bridge to the Alley, relishing its cool shade, the sight of the hopeful stall-keepers, most of whom knew a handful of languages, and the continuous stream of idlers and shoppers. Somehow, the odour, that tantalising whiff of the old world, became a key, a threshold moment that was intertwined with the moment in Thomas’ poem. Perhaps in the alchemy of my youthful imagination, the olfactory process in “Old Man” became fused with my own efforts to pin down the poignant odour that the Alley exuded. My memory of reading “Old Man” and the *jouissance* or *frisson* it triggers is inextricable from my memory of the Alley, and its unnameable odour. I read the lines differently now; the meanings have accumulated, and the poem’s essence has become doubly haunting for me. The short declarative “I have mislaid the key” which interrupts the train of thought and imagery, carries an increased freight of meaning for me, now that I am emigrant, and the British Council, the Change Alley have vanished. In “The Smell of Memory” from my travel memoir *Between Stations*, I have tried to comprehend the links between Thomas’ poem, the Change Alley, and who I have become:

Once or twice I have successfully conjured the smell of the Thomas book. Though it is inferior to involuntary memory, willed recall can sometimes bring back a whiff of what Proust calls the vast architecture of memory. When that happens, it is no longer just Thomas’ England that materialises. Hovering like an overlay is the vanished British Council Library; I find myself ensconced once more in the red armchair with a view of Clifford Pier outside. The scent and its referent attract another and that in turn draws another to form a molecular compound until the entire precinct comes to life, mapped by a complex weave of scents, a heady collage that

can erase the present. First among the precincts was Change Alley. The whole alley had an amalgam of odours intimating the faraway but it was the underlying bass note that captured the place for me. At night this smell became more pronounced, more hauntingly tangible. It was a compound concocted by the placement of the alley between buildings, the dust and urine, unique, most immediate primal, olfactory trail. There is no word to capture it but the approximation is the air that greets you when you open an old mahogany chest of papers and forgotten things. The harder I try to pin it down in words, the further it drifts from me. It is elusive as some ineffable truth or insight which you know is the key to life but which hovers beyond your reach. (172-73)

Between Stations and the poems I have written since arriving in Australia are about finding the key I have mislaid. Like Thomas, I have become a poet of memory, excavating, sifting through my pre-emigrant life for clues, for threads of a story that can be of use to where I find myself now. It is not a matter of finding closure – the past, to paraphrase Faulkner, is never dead and never finished. It serves more to map the uncertain, shifting borderland which migration has opened up. Hence I have staked out the ground of my work unwittingly, starting with the Change Alley and spreading the digs to other parts of my childhood and the Singapore that I knew. From being a poet of experience, one in search of new sensations, new encounters in travels, I have become a rememberer of scents, of fragments, a collector of memory shards that I have been assembling in different configurations and forms. Experience and memory, perhaps there is no gap between the two. The etymology of “experience” is *experientia* or “knowledge gained by repeated trials,” and memory is about reliving the experience at deeper level and revising the past in the light of the present. Eliot says, “We had the experience but missed the meaning,/ And approach to the meaning restores the experience/ In a different form...” (208). Memory is about discovering the approach, and more often than not there is more than one perspective or version of the same moment. Change Alley has occurred numerous times in my work and I would like to think that each time I see it differently, plumbing its depths, sending out soundings that reveal something new, or digging up an old secret missed earlier.

In *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* Walter Benjamin embarks on an archaeological project and architecture of memory as he restores the precincts of his past. Benjamin states that “memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, just as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging” (25-26). How apt the trope is for the work of memory. In Heaney’s “Digging” it is a metaphor for the poet’s attempt to understand his roots and heritage, and how he came to be displaced from it. Seeing an analogy between the spade and the pen, Heaney

conflates his craft with his father's trade, and enacts some sort of reconciliation between his chosen vocation and his heritage. It is one of the first poems that made me conscious of craft, in the way its sounds mesh to realise the sense, the almost palpable vowels and consonants weaving the texture of thought. But it has delivered a deeper lesson, that of memory as art, as technique, in the way Heaney drills deep into the past for what he calls "elements of continuity" (*Preoccupations* 41).

The work of memory can never be completed. At the risk of repeating yourself, you comb through the same material, trawling the same ground, alert to new revelations, seeking new knowledge of the past. There is an attendant fear that in writing about the past, in purposeful or willed recall you lose its essence or aura, that in remembering parts you lose the other facets or even the whole. Implicit in the act of remembering is also the act of forgetting. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates recounts the moment when writing was invented; the Egyptian god Thoth shows his writing to his fellow god Ammon, who warns him thus: "this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves" (69). Sad, but true, that once you commit the ghosts, the spectral images and the scent memories to writing that is to be shared, they lose the feel of something immediate, intimate, and start to recede. That is the paradox of memory.

But memory is the only technique or art left to the migrant writer. In his essay "A Dream of a Glorious Return," Salman Rushdie tries to explain why India is at the heart of all that he has written. He adds that the migrant writer "can never really leave" since the home country determines "the shape of the way you think and feel and dream" (180). I spent my first three collections travelling, seeking for a sense of home in India, Germany and elsewhere. Always departing, seeking to leave. Now, in middle age, I yield to the gravity of return, retracing paths taken and not taken, trying to understand the lesson of the middle distance. When a writer reaches middle age and lumbers further into narrowing horizons, he looks back at his younger self, and wonders about the portents that connect the past and the present. In *The Breaking of Style* Helen Vendler tracks the turning point in three poets' careers when they perpetrated violence on their own style, and signalled a new direction in their work. Heaney is one of them, and Vendler tracks the moment of departure in *Seeing Things*, Heaney's middle work, when his poetry moves from being verb-powered to a dependence on nouns. She ascribes this disruption to a middle-age impulse and need to revisit past experiences, and discover "the portent/ in each setting." Of the poetic vision in *Seeing Things*, Vendler observes: "A setting is something now re-seen, in the retrospect of middle age, as portending at the time it was experienced, even if one did not, in the past moment, recognise the portent in the setting" (42-43). Far from being mere nostalgia, the remembering is seen as

a creative act. Vendler adds: “The poetic reanimation of the past – not reliving the perceptual experience as it was encountered... but rather reconstructing it transfixed but projected forward – is a way to create a third realm, neither one of pure memory actively revived nor one of present distanced actuality, but rather one of the past remembered forward as prophecy” (48).

My work is far short of Heaney’s standards, and no comparison is intended here, but Vendler’s observation of Heaney’s self-disruption helps me understand my own breaking of style and theme, if I can call it such. From denial and rejection, from flight and escape, my work has shifted gear and made a reversal, turning back to the home I have lost. It has embarked on a project of recovery and rediscovery, marking out the excavation site of memory with the tools of imagination. The turning point in retrospect occurred when I wrote “Plum Blossom or Quong Tart at the QVB.” It was triggered by a visit to an exhibition of the life of the Chinese pioneer Quong Tart, whose face bears an uncanny resemblance to my father’s, a moment of convergence intensified by the fact that his surname is ours too. The poem begins with my daughter learning to write her name (the daughter moment I owe to Thomas), and slips into a moment of recognition:

Last week, at the Queen Victoria Building,
we stumbled on an exhibition
of the life of Quong Tart, the Chinese
pioneer who made it good in White
Australia. A tea merchant,
he married a Scotswoman, sang
Border ballads and wore tartan kilts;
he fed the Aborigines
and played cricket with the whites.
The catalogue printed his original
name *Mei*, our clan. His face,
a replica of my father’s,
high cheekbones and well-shaped jaw,
had the same charming look. It was my father
made Mandarin of the Fifth Order,
costumed in silk tunic and plumed hat.

Somewhere in south-east China
the clan lived in the same village,
and broadcast rice seed
into paddies of broken skies.
Straw-hatted, they bowed
over plough and mattock,
planted in their reflections
like their name. Then news

came of richer harvests over
 the South Sea, the white devils
 and their burgeoning empire.
 Perhaps great-grandfather sallied forth
 with Quong Tart on the same junk,
 and disembarked in Malaya, while Quong Tart
 continued south. Perhaps they were brothers.

I see the other life my father could have had
 staring out from the sepia shots,
 if our forebear had travelled on
 down-under. I could not explain
 to my daughter the *déjà vu*, but her hand
 was already pointing out the *Mei*
 below Quong Tart's portrait,
 the tap of the finger
 wiring us, connecting us
 in a tremble of recognition.
 She has finally learned
 the character of her name. (*After the Fire* 32)

I experienced a moment of homecoming as the words emerged, albeit fleeting. It confirmed my homeward trajectory, and lent an urgency and shape to *Between Stations*. I relearned my craft and allowed the lyric voice to ease into narrative expansiveness. The memories found accommodation in the essay form, which allows a fidelity to the fragmentary quality of memory and experience that the conventional memoir erases with its continuous linear narrative. The essays became salvage efforts to retrieve and restore parts of my past that have vanished: the precinct around Raffles Place and the Padang, the *tongkangs* and *sampans* plying the Singapore River, and the godowns and shophouses along its banks, and my father. At the centre of the work stands the Alley, the *omphalos* around which the fragments cohere. As I worked on the restoration project, I realised that the commemorative impulse was not new but went a long way back to the army poems, to my first encounter with Heaney and Thomas. It is not a wholly nostalgic impulse, but more a creative or imaginative one that seeks not to create the country of the past or the past as it happened, but to discover a middle ground or distance and, to use Vendler's words again, create "a third realm, neither one of pure memory actively revived nor one of present distanced actuality" (48).

I did not realise it then, but Thomas' poems have taught me how to inhabit the moment fully, and how to find repose in the liminal, dream-like state that the migrant finds himself in, between the past, present and future. Thomas' ability to think and remember in scents, sounds and objects has unlocked a key for me, a key which shows how the imagination can hold a sensory mirror up to

memory, a key which has helped me reinvent myself as an émigré/ immigrant poet living in an in-between state or condition. I can see how his way of listening and being attentive to the moment, the subtle verbal music of his remembering self, and his sense of not-being-at-home and yearning for home, have been an abiding influence and “deep impulse, deep inspiration,” to borrow Lowell’s words again, that has shaped the craft and art of my work.

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