

## Articles of Faith – Using Objects in Poetry

Esther Morgan

*'It [poetry] creates anew the universe, after it  
has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of  
impressions blunted by reiteration.'*

SHELLEY, *A Defence of Poetry*

*'Description is itself a kind of travel.'*

MARK DOTY, 'Two Ruined Boats' from *Atlantis*

I start with Doubting Thomas. In the New Testament, Thomas is famous as the disciple who is only convinced in the risen Christ when he sees the crucifixion wounds for himself, when his fingers can actually touch them. Christ's riposte is to tell him 'blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed'.

This is all very well for a religion. Religions require faith. Poetry is not a religion. I ask my students to imagine that Doubting Thomas is reading their poems. He is not prepared to take anything on faith; so what if you are happy or sad or angry, why should he believe you? The only way you can convince him of the truth of what you are saying is by making him feel it; with his eyes, his ears and, yes, his fingers.

I have found that using objects early on in a poetry course helps students to begin writing in a way that will satisfy the most doubting of Thomases. Focusing on an object sensitizes us again to the physical world, an alertness that tends to diminish once we've left childhood behind. By using objects I am trying to help students (and myself) recapture a sense of wonder, which in turn helps us rediscover or strengthens an excitement in the possibilities of language. The two are closely connected; just as we tend to use language in a formulaic

way in ordinary life, so we can be lazy in the way we encounter the world physically. We spend a great deal of time editing out our environment, not noticing its richness as we tick off our tasks for the day.

There are other reasons, too, which make working with objects of particular value in the writing of poetry. One of the differences between poetry and prose is, I think, a question of focus. Whilst acknowledging that there are areas where the two genres do overlap, in general, poetry is more tightly and intensely focused than prose. An analogy I've developed is that reading prose is like walking into a room and switching on an overhead light: you can see everything in the room at once. Poetry, on the other hand, is more like walking into the same room and switching on a torch: although you don't see all that's there, what you do see appears with greater intensity by virtue of that single beam.

The first exercise that I bring to class is designed, therefore, with two aims in view: to encourage this intensity of focus and to bring the senses back into writing. I ask the students to forget about meaning and messages, and to become like children again, exploring the world with a child's curiosity and immediacy.

I bring to the class a selection of household objects, which might include, for instance, a candlestick, cheese grater, light bulb, scarf, corkscrew, pepper grinder, etc. Before distributing these to the students to write about I ask them to close their eyes. I tell them to explore their object purely with their hands for a couple of minutes. Touch is a sense that it's easy to neglect in writing, dominated as we are by the visual. Asking them to explore their object through touch in the first instance is a good way to start the defamiliarization process. When they are ready, they can open their eyes and make notes on what they have just experienced. They then explore their object further using their other senses, making notes on the appearance of their object, any sound it might make, taste, smell, etc. I then tell them to widen their writing to include any memories or other thoughts triggered by their objects. At this stage they shouldn't be worrying about poetry with a capital 'P' or shaping this raw

material. I give them plenty of time for this exercise, so that they are forced to keep going, to keep noticing more and more detail.

What becomes evident as they read out their pieces is the extent to which this exercise helps them to re-imagine their object. In the same way that a word repeated over and over begins to sound bizarre, so an object scrutinized with such attention will start to shed its everyday invisibility. So pepper grinders become armless women who scream when their heads are twisted and rain bitterness, a cheese-grater becomes a steel wall of tears, or a light bulb the lost eye of a Cyclops. The exercise shows how a description of external reality can lead to an exploration of emotional and intellectual territories; the kind of journey suggested in Mark Doty's definition of description at the head of this chapter. With this discovery comes the pleasure in knowing that (theoretically at least) writers should never be stuck for something to write about. If a simple object can be so extraordinary, can yield several pages of notes, then surely there should be no such thing as writer's block! It also distracts students from the perceived need for Poetry to be Profound (lots of capital 'Ps'). This desire to say something important from the start, as opposed to discovering whether a poem has something to say in the course of writing it, can often cramp the student new to poetry.

I often use this exercise myself in my own writing practice and find it helpful in focusing and intensifying my writing even if I don't then go on to develop the material it triggers. Sometimes a finished piece has been the result as in the following poem, 'Avocados':

I like the way they fit the palm,  
their plump Buddha weight,  
the slight squeeze for ripeness,  
the clean slit of the knife,  
the soft suck as you twist the halves apart,  
the thick skin peeling easily.  
Naked they're slippery as soap.

I serve them for myself

sliced and fanned on white bone china  
glistening with olive oil  
or I fill the smooth hollow  
with sharp vinaigrette  
scooping out  
the pale buttery flesh.

Every diet you've ever read  
strictly forbids them.

I follow up the initial exercise described above by asking students to extend their imaginative engagement with their object by giving it a voice, that is writing a piece in the first person from their object's perspective. To help them find a way in, I suggest thinking about a 'Day in the Life' of their object, visualizing where it spends its time, how it is used, etc. I ask them to consider whether their object has all the senses or whether it is deaf or blind and what kind of 'character' their object has, for instance if it is aggressive, friendly or lonely. The surreal aspect of this exercise is also useful in creating 'anew the universe'. A useful poem to discuss, which shows the possibilities of this technique, is Sylvia Plath's 'Mushrooms', which interestingly was itself written as an exercise. I leave them with the question as to how Plath manages to create a voice for the mushrooms that sounds convincing, and also ask them to consider what else the poem might be about.

This two-step object exercise is particularly helpful early on in a course as it seems not to ask the students to be too revealing of themselves. I say 'seems' as it often does provide a personal insight into a writer's concerns, but it nevertheless offers new writers a fictional veil. Asking them to write on something that is both arbitrary and ordinary can also free students up to experiment in ways which they might be reluctant to do faced with the task of writing that difficult poem about their mother. On both counts, this can be liberating for students who have not yet got to know each other (in a British context at least!).

By the third week of a course I tend to move on to more personal exercises, which nevertheless still use objects as a point of entry. One in particular I've found useful in helping students develop a distinctive voice, by which I mean a use of language which is uniquely their own. This involves using objects as a way of prompting memory. I'm aware that the topic of memory is examined elsewhere in this book, so I won't go into detail here, except to say why I think the use of memory can be key in the discovery of voice.

In his essay 'Feeling into Words', Seamus Heaney lists the various influences that have helped shape his own language: the catechism, the shipping forecast, Irish folk songs and legend, the accent of his particular part of Ireland. Significantly, the first poem in which he felt he was successful in getting his 'feel into words' is 'Digging', a poem which is based on memory and the idea of writing as a kind of retrieval, an excavation of the past. This was the first time he felt he had managed to speak with his own voice, instead of ventriloquizing the mannerisms of other writers.

It is because our memories are unique to each of us that using memory in writing can be so constructive in developing an awareness of our own voice. But how can we access our memories in a way that is vivid and detailed? Famously, a madeleine did it for Proust's narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past*, and taking this as an example, I encourage students to find their madeleine equivalent, their trigger that will release the past.

One method of achieving this is to ask them to think of someone they know well and to write a list of possessions that they associate with that particular person, taking care to be as precise in their description of these objects as possible. I then ask them to choose one of these objects, the one that seems most resonant to them, and to write for a further ten minutes or so, introducing any specific memories which the object triggers. The resulting pieces are often very powerful; one student wrote about the jacket her dead father used to wear, another on a miniature writing table which once belonged to an ancestor who died young, another on his grandfather's violin. Each time the exercise seems to produce memorable

work, often of an intensely emotional kind. A similar exercise asks students to write about the object they would save from a fire. In these exercises, the objects become icons, part of a personal vocabulary of experience and remembrance. I'm not advocating that all poetry should be based on memory and the personal; there is an equally important place for fantasy and fiction in poetry. But as a way of accessing a living spring of language (in the same essay Heaney talks about poetry as an act of divination), as opposed to the kind of language students *think* is poetic, these exercises can provide a valuable starting point.

Speaking personally, one of the delights of writing and reading poetry has been the way it enriches my experience of the sensual world, alerting me to things that would otherwise go unobserved. For me every poem is an act of retrieval, an attempt to record the transient. Some may fail, but the very fact an attempt has been made seems to me a positive to set against mortality. With this observation I seem to be moving into the realm of general meanings myself, but perhaps that's because I believe that Poetry is important enough to deserve its capital P after all.

## What Are You Looking At?

*Paul Magrs*

I once saw a terrifying medical documentary in which a patient was blindfolded and his brain was hooked up to some kind of scanning device. The medics could watch his mind on a screen and in it they could see flashes of the guinea pig's thoughts. They were like solar flares, passing from one side of his skull to the other; all crimson and gold. And that, the voice-over told us, was in a quiet room with his eyes covered. When visual and aural stimuli were returned to him, the invisible activity inside his head was greatly increased. It looked like fireworks going off.