1999

Rational passion

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RATIONAL PASSION

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Stephen Eric Coryelle

May 1999

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ABSTRACT

RATIONAL PASSION

by Stephen Eric Coryelle

Rational Passion consists of thirty poems cataloging the impressions of the author during a walking tour of Wales. Utilizing the theories of Samuel Maio regarding voice in modern American personal poetry and taking its inspiration from the sensibilities of the Romantics, it is an exploration of the essence of poetic identity: voice, and its uses for the purposes of self-inquiry. By varying the modes of voice in poetry, and setting that poetry against the backdrop of the Welsh landscape, the author seeks to discover for himself the voice that suits him best.

The writing hearkens to the Romantics in both the event that inspired it, the tour, which was taken much in the tradition of Byron's own tours of Europe, and in the fact that it concerns itself much more with the process of its exploration than with any ultimate end.

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Dr. Jack Haeger, for introducing me to the ideas and ideals of the Romantic period.

And to my parents, James and Carolyn Coryelle. This one's for you.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Rational Passion is a collection of thirty poems that catalog, in chronological order, the author's impressions during a two-week walking tour of Wales. Its title is an amalgam of the report's two key foci, those being a rational search for poetic identity through the use of various modes of voice, and the presence of Romantic sensibilities during that search.

In the process of determining an appropriate topic for this project report it became clear that the possibilities are many. In the end, one realizes that the best subject is one which addresses an immediate concern of the writer. For the author it is identity. Who am I? It is a question that has taken on increasing importance in the twentieth century, in the wake of Modernism, where one feels that they are alienated from society and themselves, and the onset of the Information Age, as humans struggle to find a niche.

The walking tour of Wales was in part a quest for identity, both in a returning to the place of one's ancestors and the land of childhood legends. It created a foundation on which to base the project, and the final argument for the creating of poetry with identity, or self-inquiry, as its focus.

What, then, was the crux of a poet's identity? For the author's own situation, the answer was obvious: voice. But what constituted voice?

Samuel Maio, in his work documenting the use of voice in modern American personal poetry, has narrowed the categories of voice to three: confessional, persona, and self-effacing (Creating Another Self, 24-5), each possessing unique characteristics of voice to suit a wide range of aesthetic needs.

The confessional mode, as Maio puts it, utilizes the "I" as the speaker, and often relates a real or imagined personal incident. The main goal of a poet utilizing the confessional mode is that of a sincere voice, not necessarily an authentic one. Robert Lowell's work Life Studies, in a large part, makes use of the confessional voice.

The persona mode, exemplified by John Berryman's creation of Henry in his Dream Songs, involves the creation of a speaker for the poet's message, a message which may oftentimes be more authentic than that delivered in the confessional. The reasons for creating a persona vary. Berryman forms his own because he was a private individual. A poet such as Byron, however, can never be mistaken for a private man, yet he also creates his own personae, most notably those of Harold in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, and the title character in the closet-drama Manfred. For him, it was more likely an aesthetic choice than it was a necessary one, as he was never reticent in proclaiming his thoughts, in the form of his verse, whatever the consequences. Also, in Manfred one can see that he does bid a kind of farewell to his use of persona (Byron 406).

The use of persona, then, carries through the poetic ages, and possesses a high degree of utility. Perhaps the most famous use of this mode of voice is in T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," in which Prufrock serves as a mouthpiece for many of Eliot's own questionings.

The self-effacing mode is perhaps the most problematic, and the most difficult for a poet to successfully achieve. It requires that the poet sublimate himself as completely as possible in the poem, which, as Maio explains it, will lead to their transcending the work altogether (Creating Another Self, 25). Of the three modes of voice it is the self-

greatest possibility for complete objectivity. In the author's villanelle "An Odd Pair on the Streets of Laugharne," for instance, the speaker is a cat, through whose perspective the reader attains a different look at the main speaker, as the cat questions the motives of both the speaker and his companion for coming to that town.

As the author is himself a modern American poet, there is a certain sort of value in these definitions. an anchor from which to base these explorations of voice without straying too far afield. The project, then, is composed of poems written in one of these three modes of voice. based on which mode is felt to be most appropriate for the subject/form of each individual poem.

However, this anchor can also be utilized in another way. Rational Passion was planned on the whole as an experiment, an attempt to break free as much as possible from the constrictions of time and place. By varying the mode of voice, especially with use of the persona and confession, it is possible to create a speaker from a different time, as in Samuel Maio's "Pilate," in The Burning of Los Angeles (33). "The Last Song of Llewellyn," Llewellyn being the last Welsh Prince of Wales. in this collection. is another example of this. In this the trip to Wales, the land of the author's ancestors, is useful for more than providing a setting for the poem. Its ancient nature in terms of the author's own ancestry creates a suitable platform from which to base this attempt. It is hoped that through this, the voice developed would be a pure one, as it is one nurtured in a place and time different than the author's.

These varying modes of voice are essentially aesthetic choices, and this project is viewed very much as maintaining a balance between aesthetic and meaning in poetry, as

well as an investigation into how greatly the former is involved in creating the latter. Richard Cronin's findings in his study of Percy Bysshe Shelley indicate that in the case of Shelley's work at least, a close study of the superficial (i.e. aesthetic,) aspects of poetry go a long way in informing the reader's knowledge of the overall meaning of the work (Cronin xi).

Yet even assuming that aesthetic affects meaning to an appreciable degree, how much credit does one give the crafting of a work for the greatness of that work? How does aesthetic balance against content? The answer to these questions are in many cases unclear, thus it became crucial in the crafting of Rational Passion to not abandon natural inclinations in writing. For instance, the use of free verse generally indicates a confessional voice for the poem, though this may not always be such. Therefore, if there were to be a confessional poem written in a formal style, the reasons for doing so must reach beyond a need for variety; any work whose content is sacrificed to fulfill an aesthetic desire is by nature a hollow one.

Two obstacles to the creation of a genuine voice, previously hinted at, are the intrusions of the poet's time and place. Often, a writer's creation is as much a construct of their era's or country's sensibilities as it is a work of their own. Any voice created may then only be half its creator's. As mentioned previously, the variance of voice can in some small part overcome some of these barriers, allowing one to create speakers not confined to the time and place they themselves are. However, this variance on its own may not be sufficient to the task. Another variable must often be added to assist the writer in creating a voice.

In order to complement the use of the three modes of voice—confessional, persona, and self-effacing—in the quest for poetic identity, the author turned to a period of literature not his own and found inspiration in the writing of that time. That period is the Romantic.

Two factors influenced this choice. The first is that the author's walking tour is very much in the vein of Lord Byron's own tours of Europe, themselves described in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Byron's seminal work is written in the tradition of the grand tour serving as a form of education. As Byron's speaker travels from locale to locale, he collects impressions from these places. In many instances, such as in the 18th stanza of the third Canto of the poem, the area in which the poet finds himself will, by association, elicit broader themes in his writing: "And Harold stands upon this place of / skulls, / The grave of France, the deadly / Waterloo! / How in an hour the power which gave / annuls / Its gifts, transferring fame as fleeting / too! / . . . / Ambition's life and labours all were / vain, . . ." (1-8, 15-16). The author's own travels are much akin to those related by Byron as they, too, consisted of a collection of impressions, and these impressions, too, led to thoughts beyond the scope of where they were, and what they were doing.

The second factor influencing the author's choice is the writing of William Wordsworth. In seeking a definition of poetry that suits the author's own creative impulses, they found it in the "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," that poetry "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity" (Wordsworth 168). This is a potent, and Romantic, description of the poetical process, one suited to Wordsworth's style, as well as the style of Rational Passion.

What both poets--Byron and Wordsworth--have in common is the understanding, implicit in their writing, that the power of a place to influence poetic thought can be tremendous. One example of the presence of place in poetry is "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," where Wordsworth's recollections of these ruins, or more specifically the natural setting surrounding them, sparks in him an intense creative fire, exemplified perfectly with his recollections: "And I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean and the living air. / And the blue sky, and in the mind of man" (93-99).

These lines specifically led the author to Tintern. The impressions gathered at that place, in the context of both its beauty and the beauty of Wordsworth's work, form the nucleus of "Tintern's Shadow." Its title, portentous on many levels, indicates both the power of Wordsworth's own work, and of the place that inspired it.

Inspiration came in places other than Tintern, and often at the most incongruous times. Consider "Scampi," arguably the most humorous poem in Rational Passion, a sonnet that describes the ignoble act of vomiting. In this case, the impetus comes from the author's recollection of the hideously pink basin.

Whether they are of being atop the highest tower of Caernarfon Castle, or in the foggiest moor, the memories of the tour as each poem was crafted insinuated a Romantic quality upon the work as a whole.

Geoffrey Hartman, in his excellent essay "Romanticism and 'Anti-Self-Consciousness'" states that the "mind has its blissful islands as well as its mountains, its

deep and treacherous crossroads” (Bloom 54). Romantic poets involved themselves in the perilous navigation of these states of being. The author’s own discoveries during the tour spurred each of these states of mind to the forefront of consciousness; nearly each place visited possessed a power of its own, a power to create. Often, this power was the power to disappoint, creating in the author the “world-sadness” inherent in the Younger Romantics: Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. Things have changed much in the 1500 years since the days of the Arthur legend, and though there is much that is Romantic in the ruins of castles, the author must confess to the possession of a faint wish to have seen them intact. Yet this disappointment, too, has its uses. It, after all, is responsible for inspiring many of the poems in Rational Passion.

In the writing of this project, other problems were encountered and overcome. One such is in the first draft of “What I Wanted to Do, and Why.” Originally conceived as a representation of the author’s feelings upon touching down at London Heathrow, it quickly became an example of sentimentalism. I. A. Richards defines this: “A response is sentimental if it is too great for the occasion” (Richards 244). Upon reflection it was realized that the act of landing itself did not deserve the epic language given it. It was, in essence, nothing more than the end of a ten-hour trip. This work would be transformed into its present, far worthier form. It would not be the last to undergo such a change. Fully fifteen more poems would be culled from the project, or changed dramatically.

This was by no means discouraging. In fact, this necessary reworking helps to make the work a more Romantic one. One of Romanticism’s defining characteristics, one it is often decried for, is its apparent fragmentation, or incompleteness. If critics

discern this it is only due to the fact that Romanticism as a whole concerns itself with processes and not necessarily conclusions. It is, in the end, the poet that benefits from these processes.

An example of this can be found in the writing of John Keats, specifically “Endymion.” It is considered by scholars to be an important work, but not a truly great one, certainly not on the level of Keats’s other long poems “Hyperion” and “Lamia.” Keats himself was reluctant to share it with the world, stating in his Preface that “Knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public” (Keats 64).

Why, then, is it considered important? It was seen as a stepping stone to greater things. For Keats, the poem represented a personal initiation into the writing of epic poetry, an initiation that led to writing of a far greater quality. The means justify the end in his case. The process becomes more important than the goal.

These less-than-exemplary initial works in Rational Passion, then, take part in that same Romantic process, forcing better writing to emerge. That the initial poems are discarded from the collection does not diminish their value.

Another barrier made itself manifest as the author attempted to recall events that had happened in what seemed a lifetime past. Understanding that the emotions present in poetry are most often powerful ones, it becomes frustrating to realize that much of what has been experienced is normal, therefore not the stuff of which great poetry is created from. The poet is confronted with two possibilities when faced with this problem of normalcy: to abandon the idea in favor of another, or to take direction from the poets

of the "Confessional School," comprised of such worthies as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Randall Jarrell. In other words, to make things up, a quite acceptable practice among poets.

The author chose the latter course, and in this was much like Robert Lowell. A comparison, using Lowell's poem "Memories of West Street and Lepke," can be made between Lowell and the author. Lowell spent a year and a day in a country club prison in Danbury, Connecticut, as a conscientious objector during the second World War. His poem relates time spent at the infamous West Street Jail, home to murderers, rapists, and gangsters. In his defense he did spend a day there being processed before his transfer to the minimum security complex, and he is careful to never state in the poem that his entire term was spent at West Street. The emotions engendered by this work would not occur within the framework of the actual facts, a problem Lowell is aware of and works around.

Compare this to "Snowdon," in this collection, and one finds a similarity. The piece is a general complaint against the mindset of progress that led the country to erect a tourist trap on the summit of its highest and greatest peak, and the temerity its citizens had to build a railroad up its slopes.

In the work the "town" at the top is described, and the imagery used is vivid. It is not a positive picture. At the expense of sacrificing the poem's message, it should be known that the author never reached the summit, stopping three-quarters of the way up. Whether this knowledge ruins the poem or, as in Lowell's case, the poem's message is sincere enough to overcome reader knowledge, is yet to be determined. What was intended, though was a work in the confessional style of Lowell.

Food poisoning is also mentioned in the poem (actual fact,) and it was what kept the author from the summit. Therefore, much like “West Street and Lepke.” “Snowdon” manages to integrate small elements of truth into a narrative that, with some stretching of facts, means something more than the event that inspired it.

These problems and others reared up, were overcome, and manifested themselves in another form. Then, almost by accident, Rational Passion was complete.

In the third canto Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, in the 96th stanza, a question is stated: “But where of ye, O tempests! is the / goal?” (Byron 11-12). At the end of things what is created in this collection is very much a tempest with no goal, or a goal that is elusive.

And shall remain thus, a proper example of the Romantic concern with process over conclusion. Still the author made discoveries in the creative act of writing. For instance, and despite the author's intention, his American identity is infused within nearly every single work. It seems to be, thankfully, relatively free of many of the ideologies of the present time period, and its presence in the work is mostly to serve as a comparison between American identity and Welsh. Ironically, this collection has become as much a tool for inquiry into what it means to be an American as it does to be of Welsh heritage, both in blood and sentiment.

In terms of voice, questions remain. If this proves anything, it proves that a poetic voice will tend to change with the scenery. A voice was found, but one perhaps only best suited for this type of poetry. Would it translate well into a love poem? Most likely not. Nor should it.

This discovery is in itself valuable. This project was to be one of self-inquiry, voice being an aspect of identity, and the voice it found is enough. It is one that works for this situation, and that might not for any others.

As to the author's hopes of escaping time and place, they are half-dashed. However, what was hoped and wished for seems to be no longer necessary. This collection is the end result of the quest, a tempest that is, ultimately, its own goal.

It is enough.

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Farewell, My Son

There were times when I doubted you would get it,
That you would come to understand what we wanted for you,
What you should have wanted for yourself.

Time has taken the distance between boyhood and now
And faded memory's clarity. Little things make themselves
Known: Hurtling down the streets of San Francisco,
Me, Butch, and the rest of the gang, in homemade
Coasters, wooden ironing boards attached to old
Roller-skates; the house where we lived, with its peeling
Paint, that I showed you one time, though I can't recall
When we were up there, or why. My father:
Not as much as I would like to. Not as many images
As I want to have.

At eighteen I left home, joining the Air Force.
To serve my country? Not really. More for the reason that I didn't want to be
Where I was. Maybe wondering what I had to come back to,
A tempest with no goal.

Near thirty-five years have passed since the day I left.
And I have driven you here, where you embark on your own rite of passage.

Things have changed. Perhaps you know what you seek,

And perhaps you know what you're coming back to.

Things have changed. That is why I have come,

Why it is good to see you go. You will return,

And return a fuller man than before.

Maybe this time, I've gotten it right.

My father will never know.

It is a hard task, to be a father's son.

3/22-San Francisco

What I Wanted to Do, and Why

I can't tell you how it came, the revelation,
The insinuating knowledge that I have not been the person
On this earth I would like to be.

That too crystal moment made me aware
Of a forgetting, a gradual fading away in my mind
Of the process that brought me to the man I was.

There was a boy who used to play in his front yard,
The front yard to a home he had known since the first real opening
Of his eyes. His hair was ash-blond, and he had a dog, whose fur was white.

I close my eyes and remember that big dog, feel her wet nose.
The boy is no more. I look in the mirror and my hair has grown dark.
What of a boy is in a man's dark hair?
There is point A. There is point B. I am not able to connect the dots.

So that must be why I am here, watching this attractive stewardess
Use a knife to jam free my remote, that I may have endless movies and video games,
There, it's out, and I am spared ten hours of boredom.
She has gone.

I glance over. Adam is fooling with his own remote, trying to find the movie
In which I had the fortune of becoming a featured extra. He finds it, sees me, leans over,

And shakes my hand. I look around to see if anyone else has noticed. Sure.

I don't know why he came along. I don't really want to ask.

There will be happenings in the next fourteen days, I know.

Perhaps I will learn that I cannot stand this friend sitting across from me.

Probably not. Maybe it will be myself whom I cannot stand.

No, most likely we will change somewhat, become more completely the people

We are meant to be. When next I come home, I will be different.

3/22-Heading East, somewhere over America

Being a Movie Star

I can't escape it. Questions started up
In November, all variations, same
Subject. "Were you in Flubber." Yeah, kid,
That was me, taking up the whole darn screen
For three splendid seconds. I'm not that big,
The camera adds twenty pounds. . .at least.
It lost its novelty; all things do. With
Each passing day, more kids, and parents too,
Return to the same thing. I've gotten tired
Of hearing it now.

Wales was near my thoughts,
When, flipping through the plane's convenient guide
To movie or television options,
I noted, with ironic glee, the name
Of "Flubber" nearly glowing on the page.

It played four times that trip, I watched but once,
And that for just the time it took to show
My scene (the movie's not so great.) The truth
Is that I'd seen it only once before.
The second time around has dulled its edge.

It had to mean something, a portent, sign
Or omen that I rode the jet on more
Than just my seat, that pieces, tiny bits
Of me would travel side by side with all
Of these, my own fellow wanderers, each
So high above the world.

3/24-London

The Toeless Pigeons of Paddington

Never did Paddington Bear lose himself in here.

They sell his doll, but none believe. We only watch

The pigeons, missing toes, step lightly, and with care.

For they have learned to look for those who want to snare

Them, bringing quick oblivion to those they catch.

Never did Paddington Bear lose himself in here.

We sit and wait for hours, as our named train pulls near,

And notice, interest absent, the cars unlatch.

The pigeons, missing toes, step lightly, and with care.

Little light comes to lost Paddington's ancient lair,

The station's darkness comes, and soon my soul has snatched.

Never did Paddington Bear lose himself in here.

Our ride will soon arrive, I wonder: Shall I dare

To tell those kids, whose shoes and clothes are made to match:

"The pigeons have lost toes. Step lightly, and with care."

"They would not listen well," I tell myself, and tear

My eyes away, "bad apples from a rotten batch."

Never did Paddington Bear lose himself in here.

The pigeons, missing toes, step lightly, and with care.

3/24-London

A Disturbing Lack of Vowels

Oh, we're in Wales now, I think,

Unable to pronounce the word: Casnewydd,

At least with any semblance of certainty.

Adam nudges me: "I think it means Newport."

"And how do you know that?"

"It's under the Welsh name."

Oh, a simple explanation.

"Well, okay, but let's not stay long."

We never leave the station, and were never planning to.

This is just a stop along the way to more picturesque places,

The first of many.

He snaps a picture of me sitting under the double-dialect sign.

Evidence for the linguists. I am reading.

He looks around and makes a play at deciphering the train schedule.

"One hour," he states with conviction.

I wonder if that really matters.

We sit and wait.

The station is deserted; he gets bold: "Whoever gave the

Welsh unfettered control of the alphabet should be shot."

I look again at the sign, and silently agree.

Having found a likable phrase, he will repeat it several more times

In my hearing, and in the hearing of others.

He will, I pray, squash the impulse while in the presence of the natives.

Here comes the train. I put down the guidebook,

Aware at that time that it can only do so much good.

In time, your own two feet must take you there.

3/24-Newport

Twilight's Gift

The climb was hard, and strewn with rocks. The path
Ran parallel along quiet Chepstow's vast,
Long castle wall. It took us fourteen hours
To reach this town, a burg that still cowers
Between the English land and English wrath,
And its red-gold dragon standard, their past.

This thought is with us, newly come. This day
Begins our search for something deeper than
Our young American desires. The time
Is drawing dark; my fingers touch on lime-
Cast walls, so old. We've neared the top. It may
Show nothing more than a tired work of man.

But, ah, it does not. Can it be the sun,
That westers low, that shows us this? The Wye,
Muddy and calm, is glinting gold. And there,
Across the way, the lights of homes, that bear
Another kind of peace. We have been one
Day here, and here in joy my soul can lie.

3/24-Chepstow

5:58

The eventide is come.

Let those who fear the night

Return to hearth and home.

Wanderers who would roam

This land, your fear must fight.

The eventide is come.

You twain, below my dome,

If you go now you might

Return to hearth and home.

But still they stay, their doom

To mock my hands, sans fright.

The eventide is come

If leave you this place soon

You can avoid the blight.

Return to hearth and home

Beneath the waxing moon

They watch the dying light.

The eventide is come.

Return to hearth and home.

3/24-Chepstow

Died June 14, 15—

The numbers fade into time-worn oblivion,
What remains will haunt us long after
We've taken steps away from graves. Our age
Has made itself present in our two souls,
Two souls defined as young by fact of birth,
As young because they are American.
This man, who died before the first wooden
Canoes of those refugees came, still lives
By mocking our fragile identities,
Which, under rockets red and white and blue
Were formed throughout the course of long (to us)
And hard (again, to us) existences,
Our own.

Old death has held him longer than
Our nation, thought to be immortal, lives.
The wind has worn his epitaph; long years
Have passed for each slight change, and we moved worlds
In brief heartbeats. And which, at time's last call
Will stand? This stone has passed its test. It waits.
But forever will come, at its own pace.

And all the stones, this one too, will topple.
And none will know they stand on holy ground
When stand they here. And who can say, in days
To come, that one may stand by a river
Once known as the Mississippi, and know
Not where they are? Everything must die.

There will be this girl, in Los Angeles, ten
Short months after we wipe the dirt from us,
And walk away from this old place. She is
Too beautiful for song and poems, and if
She were not what she was, a thing that keeps
A wall around, I would carry her far
Away, protecting her from what I learned
At an old Welshman's grave.

But now she'll know.

3/24-Chepstow

The Wye Valley Walk

A better title came to mind, when near
Five miles had gone, after the wonder passed
From our consciousness. Said out loud, it bears
Forth mirth, a little something that could last.

“Wye Walk the Valley.” Gasps of laughter rise
From our dry throats. The trail, so harsh has brought
This out in us, to help us see what lies
Ahead, to give past hardship little thought.

Our packs are fifty pounds of added weight,
That feel as if a hundred, as across
And down these hills we go. It’s not our fate
To turn around, and know a bitter loss.

A loss of heart, a harsh denial, voiced
In pain, of all we judged as man; to know
Ourselves as not of their number. No choice,
For men we feel ourselves to be, to go
Against the wiser edicts of the ones not here.

3/25-The Wye Valley

Tintern's Shadow

Where, William, lies the promised food and life
Envisioned whilst I walked in your shadow

These many months now past, now lost. Indeed,
Now lost, when need for them is dearer than
In those past days and times. Melancholy
Does threaten from all sides, and visions, dreams
Are not of sylvan woods; I wake to empty
White walls, a bed too large for me alone.

Unmounted pictures give little comfort,
Creating only wishes to return
To that far more ignorant time and place,
An age in which I would not know this strife,
This all-defining hurt, which shallow thoughts
Of goodly days long gone can give no balm.

The world has laid too great a reckoning
Upon my heart: The ache of love, a love
That mossy stones are powerless to touch,
And that "a sense sublime" does not affect,
As both partake of essences alike.

Belief that hearts can only break but once,
That things get better given ample time,
That none of us is meant to live alone.
False thoughts! False hope! False love!

Ah, do they care,

That ancient pile of rock, eternal woods,
For youth's indiscriminate ravings, rage,
Its sorrow? No. They will move not, mutate not.
They wait for me to come again, to learn
Anew their lessons, never judging, quiet.
One day I will be ready to return.

3/25-Tintern

Cotton Dries Poorly

This camping's not as great as we had thought
It would be. Rain came pouring hard all night,
And my warm sleeping bag, so heavy, brought
Another gift: wet cotton, meant to fight
The cold, even when drenched, does not, but holds
It in (rather effective at its task,
I have had time to note.) In time, the colds
We get from this ordeal will surely mask
The joy we feel in being here. Now, Steve
Appears quite nicely warm in his own sack
(It's lighter, oh, and waterproof.) We'll leave
Here soon enough; I'll have to try and pack.
Daylight has come, well, day, for light has yet
To penetrate our trip, but soon, I'll bet.

3/25-Monmouth

Childrens' Children

I ceased calling it an American thing after
The third or fourth time: A teenage girl, no beau
Within sight, pushing a baby around in a well-used
Carriage.

I don't know why it seemed more prevalent
In these places than at home. Perhaps it was because
My eyes were more open. Perhaps it was the rain.
A realization, is what it was, that I was getting too old to
Call myself young.

I felt that age on the bus to Swansea,
As I watched two kids attach themselves at the tongue
For the entire journey.

What did they know of life,
And what could I have told them, and would they
Have believed what I said?

Very little, I knew then,
And tried not to gawk too noticeably.

I thought instead

On the drivers that took these roads daily, and the
Difference in how they answered a politely proper
“Thank you.” Yesterday, it had been with a surly
“Aye,” as we disembarked into misty Monmouth.
Today, it had been with a “Welcome, gents.”

A

Great improvement over the course of our travels
In these bigger carriages.

The kids (Can we call them anything but?) got off
When we did, and walked off to find their own
Destiny.

3/26-Swansea

Fog on the Cefn Bryn

A shoelace loosens and my friend, water happily dripping from the bridge
Of his nose, bends over to retie it, his foot resting gently atop a stone
That has stood in that spot for centuries, that will be there long after our muddy
Footsteps have been cleaned away.

I keep walking, for the moment unaware of the change.

The wind blows so hard, so loud, that the rest becomes silence,

And you were there at that time, atop that venerable

Sandstone ridge, you would hear only that, feel only the driving of the rain

Against your too-thin coat. Rain? Nothing more than a sprinkle, really.

But being thrown so hard at you that it seems a hurricane.

And shoelaces must be tied.

I reach a place, a quiet place then,

Sheltered by an understanding slope of hillside.

It will not last long before the torrent, ever seeking, discovers my

Hideout and flushes me from its peace with redoubled fury.

I stop anyway, too drained in body to go any further, too alive in spirit

To want to. I look over, spot him, nothing has changed.

Has he always been there, endlessly tying and retying? I ask to no one in particular.

No answer. Did I expect one? No.

I raise my head. *So this is a moor.*

It is good to be lost, at that time better than most.

I am alone, a wall of wind dividing me from my only companion.

Minutes pass, a moment of tranquillity. I choose not to reflect, not to recollect.

At this moment, soaked, with a back that aches from fifty pounds of gear,

I come to see that I am a long way from opened veins,

That there is beauty in shades of gray,

That a truth will impose itself on us at the damndest time.

The wind stays away, replaced with the steady sound of my breathing.

Soon after, my friend joins me, places his hand on my shoulder;

I become aware, once more, of the rainwater clinging to me, the cold

Working its way into my lungs.

“What are you thinking?”

That I will never stand here, in this moment, again. That whatever I had short

Seconds ago is now lost, destined to fade into vulnerable memory.

“Nothing.”

3/27-Reynoldston

Men I Never Knew

I never saw a statue dedicated to those
Fallen in war, until I crossed the sea, and graven on it were
The names of those who died in hells with names. Gallipoli,
The Salme, lands where the dirt is watered with crimson.
There are Welsh men buried near Flanders,
Their last thoughts of Welsh mothers, Welsh homes.

What is war, that it makes a man leave his land behind,
To bleed on foreign soils? Is there a brotherhood of us all,
That sunders these ties?

In the end, our fates lead us to seek a place of rest,
And we call that place home, however far from ours it may be.
In the end, we are nothing but statues, faces, names, and finally,
Memories, all meant to fade away in their time

In the town square of Carmarthen, it was dry,
And I watched as the people, young and old, passed by,
Sparing this silent sentinel of past glory, dearly bought,
Not a single glance. Just the one American tourist,
Hat placed backwards on his head, who had never known
The fear of foreign feet marching across his beloved home.

Stayed, counting names he could not pronounce.

I want to walk the streets of San Jose and see no statues.

3/27-Carmarthen

An Odd Pair on the Streets of Laugharne

I see them now, they're drawing near.

What will it take to make the two
come over here and scratch my ear?

A soft purr might, but they are clear
across the street, a meow'll do.

I see them now, they're drawing near.

How strange that they walk without fear.
They're smart ones, for they know their cue.
Come over here and scratch my ear.

What made those two depart from dear
ones, on a trek they might soon rue?
I see them now, they're drawing near.

Americans, then, who've come clear
across the sea, if only to
come over here and scratch my ear.

They must be off to Dylan's, tears
for him to be soon shed anew.

I see them now, they're drawing near.

Come over here and scratch my ear.

3/27-Laugharne

Dylan's Place

To feel the worn-smooth, warm-smooth stones of the porch
Under my cracked and dry hands, to look over the tired and muddy
Estuary of your happiest days, to see what you have seen through cracked and dirty
Window panes, unknown friend, gives my heart peace.

Peace, yes, and a heavier feeling, not quite substantial (for I know what cannot be),
Of regret, a world-sadness that comes with knowing that your way, this simpler way,
Is not mine, can never be mine. That I will never marry a Caitlin, never come to dwell at
Such a place as Laugharne, your place, with one such as her.

That I will never be buried in the quiet churchyard of a small town, marked by only
A simple cross, freshly repainted with each passing year.

But it means something, at least, to know that had I the gift to accept this,
I would.

For mine is a world of Master's degrees and Ph.D's, and may always be thus,
And there is little good to come of wishing otherwise, for this life is not so black
As we might think it to be of times. These feelings fade,
Replaced with other demands, other things beyond a quiet shore,
That only rarely feels the heat of the sun, for which I love it.
And I part from it with sorrow not sweet, but just there, in my lap.

Walking out of the town, I ran into the curmudgeon who buried you,

Then later your wife, so many years ago. Perhaps not understanding my look as
I saw your cross on the hill, maybe thinking me lost, confused, he pointed the way.
There was never a need; I knew, as I know that it was right for you to die so far from
This realm, this tranquil land. For here you were sustained, just as the memories of here
Keep my heart warm with the hope that, one day, I shall return, maybe bringing
Someone with whom I may share this gentle boon.

But I may not, for tomorrow comes not for all.

I pull my trusted baseball cap tighter over my head, warding the coming rain,
And, head bowed with thoughts of my own making and of yours, I trudge my
Weary way to your grave.

I will be there before much longer.

3/27-Laugharne

My Town

He is combining Guinness and Coke, and we are in a deserted lounge.

The bar, with its venerable wood, connects us to the other room,

That serves as the village pub.

We are staying upstairs.

I record words in my journal, words I have not yet come to understand

The importance of. That I may never.

He has added more Coke.

Sounds drift in from the pub, someone has put the Beatles on.

I like the Beatles, I think, as I rise to get another glass

Of cider (I hate beer.) I lifted my head to signal the

Bartender, who will be cooking our breakfast in the morning,

And started wishing that I hadn't.

Silence, then, from myself, enough of it to make him put his glass

Down, to rise from the comfortable couch, to stand next to me.

A smile spreads, but I am too bewildered to match.

"The sixties didn't die, they moved to Wales," he declares, and

Goes to jot down this insight into his own book.

He must have been right.

Only in my town, or really the place I had the fortune of sharing
The same name (sort of) with, could a coven
Of aging hippies exist. It is a forgotten town,
Cowering under a forgotten castle, and we waited two hours
For a bus that could take us here.

3/28-Llansteffan

The Last Song of Llewellyn

Cilmeri falls this day, my countrymen.

We need no light of dawn, no sight of seers

To tell us that our doom is here. That fen,

So close, is where we shall soon die. No tears,

My friends, let sadness come ignobly, yes,

But suffer women's water not this way.

The battle lies before us. Shall you guess

How many men of Edward's die today?

I dare not, knowing that the number's great.

My blood is burning, fired by promised boon

Of glory, deadly glory, very meat

Of Welsh existence. Death comes not too soon.

The banners have been raised. Up arms! To me!

Our deaths are for the honor of Cymru!

3/28-Llandrindod Wells

Not a Welsh Town

This is a nineteenth century creation,
With a sign above the train station
That declares it a triumph for Victorianization.

Never had a Welshman willingly bowed to that Queen,
Nor ever called the life they lived in that time Victorian,
Yet, here, on rails that barely touch on English soil,
Lies a town that reeks of an older time that was not our own.

Is that why these lads have come here, to feel
A transport to a place their forefathers fought to be free of?
Go back, instead, and tell of Cymru's dying days,
And warn your countrymen well, lest they fall to the same serpentlike
Need for nostalgia, never thinking on the fact that
If past values were of value, they would never
Have faded into the mists of time.

Ah, but they're young ones, these two,
With straight backs never bent by the needs of the earth.
What know they of struggle, of identity?

They've come here on the coattails of a guidebook,
But, wait, does that faraway look in their eyes

Proclaim their desire to ignore it as often as possible?

What do they see in this place that I do not?

And there they go, walking the same hill that I have seen

Countless others clamber up, and almost as many clamber back down,

Their spirit defeated before they reach the summit and what lies beyond.

A steady step, boys, will get you there.

Ach, they've taken out the guidebook again.

Will the scanty directions scare them back into this

Safe "English" town.

No, they have put the devilish thing away,

Perhaps learning to follow not the words of others,

But their own bliss.

3/29-Llandrindod Wells

The Happy Valley

The promised bluebells missed their cue. Our tramp
Went through the glen, about an hour's journey,
Us searching hard for them, but not one could
We see. The wrong season, I reasoned. Would
There ever have been one better? We see
No answer, trekking through the time, our breath gone damp.

Perchance the reason lies near fallen logs,
Once trees, of which we found far too many
For the present need. Proud no more, but dank
With rot and smelling of progress's rank
Demands. The rain has drenched complete any
Possible quick construction, making useless bogs.

So even here, in silent shadowed vales,
The hand of man comes quiet, stealing fast
The lands of dream. I can do naught against
This though, and soon, the last dale will be fenced.
And had I strength to try and fight, the last
Thing wished is an American rescuing Wales.

3/29-West of Llandrindod Wells

Turning the Page

“Look!” I point, indignation flowing from my features,
Palpable in its potency. “On the other side of the Ithon,
The castle mound rises to the right, and a steep path up the hill
Will take you to Cefnylls Castle,’ it’s right in the guidebook.”

I watch Adam, standing atop the highest point on the hill (mountain, really,)
With a wild sweep of his arm, as he cries back: “Then where is the castle?”
Hmm. Interesting question.

In the relative shelter of a lower peak, the wind screaming overhead
In its wrath, I wonder again what brought us to this lonely place.
All I could come up with was that we had a free day, and
Like so many of our sidetracking adventures, it
“Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Two hours after leaving twee Llandrindod Wells, we have
Found ourselves here, with spectacular views of St. Michael’s
Church, the oldest in Wales, and the winding Ithon.

We are also cold.

Adam snatches the guidebook, and begins turning pages,
His brow crinkled in deep thought. Then, he snatches my arm.
He has, I note, turned the page. “. . . which is nothing more than

A pile of rubble.”

I have been sitting on a piece of the castle.

Too much has passed between touchdown in Heathrow and

This soggy pinnacle for this to matter. Laughter echoes, making the

Valley come alive once more. “It was a stupid place to build a castle, anyway,”

I say, determined to forge a kind of triumph in this.

Adam, clambering down the treacherous slope, declines to reply.

But it was.

The town is one way, the way we came.

We take the other, vaguely aware that we will probably get lost,

And willing, anxious even, to take that chance.

3/29-West of Llandrindod Wells

Looking Ireland's Way

My love, it seems our hope is on the sea,
And what aid Erin brings. I want to know
Your feel once more, upon a silent lea,
Before this war mars love and brings it low.
Across the water, help is coming, men
Who bear no love for English kings, who will
Take arms with Wales. Will this yet matter when
They land? It must, for we have learned to kill.
And that does make a sore lesson. But learn
It well I did, for thy own sake. It may
Be that I'll die this dawn, 'til then I'll yearn
For your embrace, on a far gladder day.
I never wished for blood to stain my soul,
It burrows deep, a craven, starving mole.

3/30-Criccieth

A Sunset on the Atlantic

I call to thee in my mind, skipping rocks across the sea,
Hoping that one will reach, by some twist of the waves,
The shores upon which your feet play.

But we are both facing towards the setting sun,
And no matter what I contrive, we shall not at this time
Feel the same waters upon us.

I remember the feel of your arms around me,
The taste of the wine we drank to delay the clock's hands,
On the night before I was to leave.

I may never know what it meant for you to let me go.
We'd never been apart. it seems. These days have
Shown me how it feels to see you only in dreams.

What are you thinking? Are you sleeping soundly?
(I've yet to comprehend the time difference here.)
Do you still nurture tender thoughts of me?

Adam is shielding the sun, perched for all the world,
Like the Traveler Looking Over the Sea of Fog,
An ironically picturesque figure.

This is not such a bad place to pace the sun,
High, where the elements still walk naked,
And where we can forget, for the moment, that we are of this world.

And all I can say, for all this starkness of being,
Is that I miss holding you in the frozen food section
At Safeway, for no other reason than that you were there.

3/30-Criccieth

Beware, all Bats

I can't claim to know what he was doing there,

But he seemed to be more lost than we were.

Searching, in vain, for the local bookstore.

He asked us directions; we only needed to open

Our mouths and, no matter what we said, he would understand.

Still, ever to be helpful, we told him that we didn't know.

His answer, in a British accent, "Of course you wouldn't. Sorry."

Well, at least he was polite, considerate for a man

Who used to chew the heads off of bats during his shows.

Perhaps if I had thought about it to a further degree,

I would have recognized an essence of surreality

To the whole affair. It was, after all, a small town.

And a smaller world than my tired feet, apparently, believed.

Still, Ozzy had as much right to be there as we had,

And as much reason. It was, after all, his island.

A good laugh we had of it, walking the way

To slate-formed Dolbadarn, which can't

After the wonders of Chepstow and Caernarfon, qualify as a castle.

But there it was, and the entrance was free,
That being the case when no one is there to collect the fare.
A hard reckoning it would have been were that not the case.

And then more laughter, as a notion occurs to me,
I wait, look around for eavesdroppers, find none, and
Declare: "I never knew Ozzy could read."

3/31-Llanberis

Snowdon

Still the mighty mountains stand
-Ceiriog

And a narrow single-gauge railroad now climbs their peaks,
Carrying the less hardy to the cloud shrouded summit,
Where gaudy tourist traps eagerly await them.

I had food poisoning that day: bad shrimp,
And still I took the trek on foot, no fashionably-polished walking
Stick to hold my steps steady, to keep me in the wake of cramping.
Thrice I decorated the dirt with the offerings of my bowels,
For what? A fleeting glimpse, perhaps, of the red-dragon flag
Of Wales, in the firm hands of the rightful king? No such luck.
Arthur, if he had ever waited on these slopes, fled long ago
With the first coming of the construction crews, the hammer and nails
Of Progress.

It is a sight to wonder at, if you can shut out the t-shirt stands, and I could.
Walking far enough to leave it all behind me (farther than I ought,)
I managed a circular vista, and the thought came to me, banishing
All other thoughts, all cynical thoughts, all disappointed thoughts,
That I was at that moment at a greater height than any other mortal in the whole
Of the land.

Bending down over the precipice once more, hands clutching my gut,
I prepared to pay the price for this loftiness.

3/31-Llanberis

Scampi

It's not the same. That's what I learned today.

It's fried, in greasy fat that hasn't been

Replaced in God's lifetime. I think I may

Not last the night. I think I killed my spleen.

That's what I get, for letting hunger ruin

Normally sound judgment. Why did I eat

That crap? It smelled quite foul, and very soon

My bile will cover this pink toilet seat.

And there it goes; it looks like lunch. Adam

Is concerned, hands me pills. I thank you, sir,

My true apothecary. Good goddam!,

It's come again, like fish to shining lures.

And there it ends, my stomach heaves in pain,

Its rythmn the equal of driving rain.

3/31-Llanberis

Please Do Not Walk on the Grass

I glared in the sunlight across the green expanse
Protected by this simple imperative, engraved
On a sign built close to the ground.

There, on a black metal and concrete slab that was covered
In bird droppings, was where Chucky himself was crowned
Prince of Wales, in the heart of the nationalist north.

A greater slap in the face I could not imagine,
And I pondered there, on that sunny day, the implications
Of that calculated act.

What was it that caused the crowning to be here,
In the one place where the large and lyric language
Of their ancestors still trips on children's tongues?

I am a blind man.

I kneeled to the stone ground, and bent, so quietly to caress
The grass. Waiting, I beheld no secret police bursting through
The castle doors to take me away to the place they keep those like me.

That slab again, and now it vexed in its nearness.

Shielded on all sides by that emerald, not-to-be-walked-on grass.

I knew then, that it was not the grass that was so precious.

Had I possessed the leaping strength of Owens, I could vault

This barrier and land on that platform of prunedom,

And obey the very letter of the law.

But this usurpation lay beyond the ability of my legs

To carry me there. If I were to break this taboo,

Would the folk here, still mainly clad in Plaid Cymru, support my reign?

A bloody war it would be.

And were it not for a simple sign, it would have been.

4/1-Caernarfon

The Footsteps of Gawain

He never crossed over, I do recall
That. Good, I say, I'll surely have him beat.
The northern tower of Caernarfon's eight
Has brought this thought forward, has killed the pall
Over my soul. Atop this height, the small
Island of Anglesey, in nearness sweet,
Is but a hop away. What will I meet
When cross I that small strait? What quest will call?
I'll find out tomorrow, as now the mount
Of Snowdon calls. It may be that we will
Be made to linger there, and the Menai
Uncrossed. A not so sad conclusion, still,
It would be good to cross, look back, and count
The steps that took us there, for maps can lie.

4/1-Caernarfon

A Long Train Ride

This is the day he has waited for, has come with me for.

Scotland. Say it aloud and it sounds the same.

Am I glad, yea, but more for him.

And can there be enough of gladness in me

To overcome the two things that are making me wonder

If I can possibly choke down this pre-processed, now microwaved

Cheesburger Deluxe, bought at great expense from the dining car:

I don't know when I will ever touch Welsh soil with my

Boots again, and my stomach is still quite queasy

From ill-advised shrimp.

He is going home, at least that is what he wishes to feel

When we cross a border invisible to anyone but a Scot.

Who knows instinctively when he has crossed over.

For myself, I would be happy enough to see that the

Battle sites from "Braveheart" have not been turned

Into soccer fields.

It is too soon for me to recollect what dreams my eyes have seen,

Or to count the gallons of rain that have collected, mostly unwished for,

On the team jacket of my college hockey team.

I am supposed to be used to the cold.

King Arthur never appeared to me, and now it is a day too late.

Whatever visions I had have come from my own skew on what

Was real, what was felt and known to be there.

And these were good.

Glasgow is the next stop, now, and I'm doubting we'll stay

When Stirling is just another hour further.

I feel better now, more ready to handle the weight of another

Country.

In three days we return to London.

4/1-Entering Scotland

Coming Home

Somewhere, heading east over the Atlantic, it had turned dark.

Dark as only despair can get, dark as all that is unknown.

Looking out the window, all I could see were the lights

On the wing, a lonely beacon calling to nothing.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

I knew not what I was getting into, what we thought could be done

In two weeks.

Two long weeks, and I am returning.

A different plane, slightly different view,

And time is slowing for us as we race west.

The sun shining bright.

What I was looking for no longer holds weight,

As I have found that the looking, in this case, has counted more

Than the finding, the striving more than what was gained.

This lesson intends us to remember it.

Six days ago, bent over a porcelain pink toilet,

I wanted to be home. Just for that moment I had forgotten

The boon I had granted myself, a fulfillment of the need to feel familiar

Foreign soil.

And when the sun shone hard on my face the next morn,
I was ready to straggle on with better cheer, my pack
Weighing just a bit heavier, and a little of my mind
In a place that I had chosen over time to blur my awareness to.

And now I am coming home.

There. A word once deemed lightly for fear of its moment.
A place I had run to my roots to avoid, if only for a time.
No more.

I am coming home. Two weeks of hardship suffered, happiness enjoyed,
Knowledge learned, and wisdom nurtured are brought back.
To recall in silence what going away meant for me,
And what it means to return.

4/5-Heading West, somewhere over the Atlantic

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