

## Generosity

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So while you've this passion for leek vinaigrette,  
you know what it means - no French kissing yet.

Martial, Book XIII (*Xenia*), xviii, translated by Hamish Whyte

"Xenia" derives from an ancient Greek word which some dictionaries translate as "strange" and some as "hospitality". The Romans borrowed the term: it refers to little poems attached to objects that guests were given to take away with them, probably after a dinner party. It's a tradition similar to the practice today of party bags, those little bags containing sweets and perhaps an inexpensive toy given to children as they leave at the close of a celebration. The singular is xenion, the xenion above referring to a gift of leeks.

The same source is most encountered in English, perhaps typically, within a negative compound, "xenophobia". Although xenophobia is usually described as the fear and hatred of foreigners and the foreign, the question mark in its etymology suggests something more complex, something meaner, something rather more close to home than that. Its modern-day usage is surely conditioned by an aversion to hospitality as much as the foreign, an aversion to active goodwill, to trust, an inversion to the risk that any act of generosity must always entail.

I think immediately of *The Daily Mail* when I think of English xenophobia. Wrongly, because I know that *Daily Mail* readers - people like anyone else, if I may risk condescension in so saying - should not have their identities circumscribed by an easy interpretation of any one behavioural trait, least not the profoundly ambiguous act of reading one publication.

And, after all, no British newspaper is immune to a tone at odds with civil discourse. *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, papers which are sometimes, however rashly, taken to represent ground on the middle or even the left of the political spectrum (producing stories

that are coterminous with a rational presentation of information) aren't above the constraints of their form. They have more information, and they have more sophisticated ways of being responsive to their own mistakes, but many readers will find these papers, too, read at times discordantly: in their case, like the mouthpiece of any loyal subject born and bred in the ancient villages of Toldyouçeaux or Tooclever-by-Half.

The larger audiences for the broadcast media make theirs, if anything, a more serious case. The BBC may claim to be unbiased, but anyone who has watched their "24 hour news" TV channel and seen the same half dozen pat stories recycled like bad air across the hour and throughout the day, will know that they are far far from being comprehensive, especially at the point when they claim most to be. The gaps themselves point to a structural prejudice. The world is full of content, but BBC 'Worldwide' appears to exist in a near-vacuum.

Why is this? And why raise it in an essay about poetry, about generosity?

It's a question of informational form, of having to add half-story to half-story, while leaving so many full stories completely out. Because it's actually very difficult to write news within the rules of what news must be - a particular kind of brevity is only one constraint, a particular kind of prosody, "topicality", "an angle" and "public interest" are others - without failing the spirit of truth, if not its letter. Often, its letter, too.

Many readers of poetry, though not exclusively readers of poetry (let's not get carried away with ourselves, here), will recognise this immediately. Poetry, by and large, won't actually tell a reader much that is factually new. Pound was saying this when he seemed not to be saying it in his phrase "Poetry is news that stays news". A formal knowledge of such a rich and technically nuanced text-type as poetry, will, all the same, develop a sensitivity to the technical limitations of any text, how words serve the characteristics of each particular genre, and what a slave truth is to the conventions of each and every mode of communication.

This doesn't mean that "everything is relative" or that "there's no such thing as truth", phrases which are typical of taking the worst-case scenario as if it were the norm. That's a way of thinking, by the way, that will eventually paralyse any culture, an over-insurance that leads to bankruptcy, moral or otherwise. It does mean, though, that one or two steps have to

be taken to get round the particular kind of pre-processing of information the print and broadcast media represent.

Of course, readers may always have to turn to newspapers and the online and broadcast services for some recent information, but if they are alive to the formal qualities of the news story (which means being alive to the formal deficiencies, too), they will know they will have to look in other places as well. This is exactly the same as not accepting the four or five well-known poetry imprints as *necessarily* hallmarks of quality: no reader of poetry could seriously believe that these are guarantors of the best, even though the reader knows he or she may have to work harder to find other work.

In the world of news, to correct, re-orientate, and downgrade such mainstream sources, readers will need to read single issue sites, say, and tap in to information networks not so directly mediated by what is taken to be commercial and state imperative; they'll have at times to consult genuine (as opposed to cuttings) libraries whose careful memories often contradict the instant histories used by the media; and, perhaps as important as anything else, they'll have to enjoy the conversation of friends good enough to refine the arguments of each other and contradict each other's prejudices.

Friends aren't always easy to find, but more formalised circles, be it book groups, poetry workshops, or support or action groups, all of which in themselves may have nothing to do with ideas of a more generalised engagement with the mediators of power, may all provide the grounds for developing a means of social scrutiny that can be transferred and bring life back to the larger power structures and institutions, if they are found worth saving.

Animated discussion with those you love is one of the great pleasures and "xenia" are surely in that spirit. Open conversation may not always have been possible at the parties where xenia were presented, but I like to think that some meetings would have been among trusted friends only, and then relaxed conversation would have gone on for hours. To folk who prefer the noun "crony" to the noun "friend", it is easy to traduce talk like that as "chattering", but, political insider trading notwithstanding, everyone, I hope, can rise above the jagged naming words of media expressionism. The generosity of relaxed conversation is one of humanity's great "gifts", and I see xenia as symbolising a more intimate variation on

the evening's group conviviality, a host's letting each guest know that they have thought of them individually, too.

Each poem would be epigrammatic in character and ideally say something witty about the gift and the host's relationship to the guest. It might affectionately refer to one of the guest's traits. Martial's *Apophoreta*, strictly speaking a more impersonal form of label, since the term refers to inscriptions for gifts that might well be drawn by lots at the party, seem occasionally to have this sense of intimacy, too:

So take this torch to light your way at night:

It's shockproof, like my heart, and weathertight.

Martial, Book XIV (*Apophoreta*), lxi. From *Martial Mottoes*,  
translated by Hamish Whyte, Galdragon Press, 1998

Here, perhaps the guest had talked on a previous occasion about the long unlit pathway to his or her villa; perhaps they had said they'd been having nightmares in their new house, or they'd mentioned how dark the rooms were, even in summer. The torch, modernised by Whyte to suggest actual and emotional electricity, has therefore become an attentive kindness and a joke between them, and there is clearly some romantic "charge" between giver and receiver, too. My speculations are another way of saying that there is some contextual secrecy in this poem, the sort of secrecy inherent in any intimacy, romantic or otherwise. That privacy is not a danger to the poem once it has been accepted as an element of it, and, as with any poem, especially poems that are far more opaque than this one, readers should not run to be excluded by something they think they don't immediately understand. The reader has to be generous to the poem so that it can be generous to the reader.

By having these apparently private poems published, Martial allowed them a public role. He gifted them beyond beyond the individualism normally implied by the idea of the gift: he encouraged their enjoyment and interpretation beyond the specifics of their occasion. *Xenia* and *apophoreta* were witty, even edgy at times, and Martial is seldom remembered without a

remembrance of his sharp tongue. I hope I don't overstate the case for his work's gregariousness, although accusatory wit is also an acceptance of a social world where satire has force. If the giver acts indiscriminately, showering gifts on one person, say, or giving to all, generosity must be devalued. As long as mean-spiritedness is not involved, generosity actually needs a critical intelligence, even a kind of hardness, to keep its worth.

At *xenia* parties, maybe gift and poem were used ostentatiously: you can imagine the tagged presents stacked in a specially prepared corner in the room the host had chosen for the party. They could even be presented one-by-one to those in attendance as part of the proceedings, with a reading of each poem, rustle, tear (if wrapped or boxed), gasp or laugh, thank-you, and applause. Martial structures his book of *Xenia* to correspond to the courses of the Roman dinner, so a variation on the reading of Christmas cracker mottoes comes to mind, with or without the groans at awful jokes. Performance, banter and fun: all the senses and the near-perfection of the best parties.

(Yet some hosts, I'm sure, would have preferred to be more discreet, maybe keeping the treats out of sight until the end of the evening when they'd be handed to each guest as good-byes and a special word or two said.)

When Whyte offers two of his translations as a gift in itself, in a festschrift to the poet Gael Turnbull on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, this complex private/public package of the epigram tradition is picked up and passed on, pass-the-parcel style, as much as to new readers of Turnbull as to the esteemed poet himself. The first, in particular, is a kind of non-gift gift. It names something of which the Gael Turnbull had better *not* be the recipient, dumb-bells. Metonymic "vineyards" (bearing poetic fruit) are appropriately to the fore:

### *Dumb-bells*

Leave the dumb dumb-bells to the chaps at the gym –  
trenching vineyards will keep you in better trim.

(Martial, translated by Hamish Whyte, Book XIV (*Apophoreta*), xlix.

Taken from *A Gathering for Gael Turnbull*, ed. Peter McCarey, Au Quai, 1998)

Martial has been put to much denser use, too. Arkadii Dragomoschenko's long poem, called *Xenia*, in the translation by Lyn Hejinian and Elena Balashova, remembers a probably childhood present as a means of making a momentary ascent through an unbreathable medium that might be memory itself - "You rip off the gift's waxed string and you follow the ascent / of the oxygen bubbles". I think of Orson Welles's sledge *Rosebud* here, a present that joins childhood to the dying hero's last moments, and I think of the way Eugenio Montale modernises the epigram tradition, too, in the "Xenia" sequences in his late work *Satura*. Here there is less comfort: the "gifts" are actually the last points of contact between the dead and the living. Material ephemera, the individual objects of all our clutter offer surprisingly poignant effects: a little thing like the label on a bottle of wine or a now much diminished phone bill, turns unexpectedly into the elegiac mode, a remembrance of Montale's late wife. What the gift, what generosity is, shifts and almost evades us: presents always end up conventionally useless, they become, ideally, tags to the real gifts, the memories to which they, and we, have become so attached.

*Xenia* have a distant relative in Anglo-Saxon riddles, where, a millenium before the great language-change in English language poetry, which is to say a millenium before Edward Thomas, a millenium before William Carlos Williams, the focus was again on the beauty and mystery of humble and familiar objects. Riddles, however, defer pleasure: they tease and puzzle, and they make very strange the familiar. The familiar can be made so strange in fact that some of the riddles in the main repository of Anglo-Saxon riddles, the Exeter Book, have today no secure solution.

For instance there's Riddle 90, which begins, "A strange thing it seemed to me / a wolf captured by a lamb". "The lamb lay down by a rock, / and pull[ed] out the wolf's bowels" it goes on (they had a rather closer relationship to animals these Anglo-Saxons than most in the

West have now), before ending "I saw a great marvel, / two wolves standing tormenting a third; / they had four feet, they saw with seven eyes." (John Porter, translator, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles*, Anglo-Saxon Books, 1995).

Any answers?

A table and some points of light? Candles, jewels? The lamb might suggest Christian resonances since, though most are secular, one or two of the riddles are biblical. I'm afraid I can offer nothing better than that, but the idea of such a long unsolved riddle makes me smile. I guess it was solved at a point closer to the time it was written, only to be forgotten later on.

Sometimes a poem that works in a way with which the reader is not immediately familiar is accused of being like a crossword puzzle. I think it was Norman MacCaig who recalled one of the readers of his early New Apocalypse verse wrote to him in perplexity, expressing the hope that the poet would one day publish the answers. Yet even with the enigma of Riddle 90, where there really is a particular subject that has been deliberately disguised, the poem does not need that meaning to show a good deal of its beauty. It's almost shocking, but it's beauty nevertheless, and the poem has a skilled musicality: it is alliterated in the original in the convention that after centuries only Chaucer's example made minor. These are the "gift" elements of a poem that was yes likely intended more as a challenge, and as a piece of public virtuosity, but whose rhythmic, structural, visual and nuanced sound qualities cannot help but foreground its worked-for and so pleasurable elements, the innate generosity of this genre of concealment.

For trying to understand "difficult poems", some of which really aren't about decoding one text into a clearer shorter one, into some "real message" or "solution" (imagine listening to songs that way! - what would be the point!), such a riddle offers an oblique lesson. The poemy parts of a poem, what a poem is doing when it's doing the poem, can be the most of what opaque poems are. Not, as sometimes they're taken to be, "a private world". Not, in fact, "too personal" to be understood, not "too academic". Rather, poems experienced by readers or listeners, almost, though not quite, as they might experience a piece of music or a painting they can't wholly accommodate within the sense-making world of their previous experience. People find one or two points that they can fix on, perhaps they like the rhythm or the hook in

a song without really knowing what it's all about, the balance of colour in a painting, and then they live with it, hear it again, take another look, never thinking for a moment that they will understand it all or, just as importantly, that there is necessarily a single overarching thing to be understood. They are already relaxed enough to begin to enjoy themselves (taking "enjoyment" to include a range of emotions, contemplation, much smiling, pretending to be appalled etc).

Some of my most important reading experiences have been through being encouraged to relax with a poet's work in this way. Friends' recommendations that I read, say, Denise Riley, or, Kelvin Corcoran, or, more recently, Karlien van den Beukel, have modified my whole reading and writing practice, have simply allowed me to be in the company of kinds of text-pleasure and articulacy that, good literary criticism notwithstanding, I might well not have met otherwise.

I don't deny that there may be some "health-giving" corporal punishment in the minds of some "difficult poets", but instead of treating their poems as an ordeal that the poet hopes will be good for its reader in the long run, it's maybe better, whatever it is felt the poet's intentions are, to see such work as a gift to the reader, as an act of generosity, as something which can be domesticated in whatever way the reader and the text can agree on, and lived with in that way, if they so wish. I'm not expressing an attitude of "anything goes", rather I'm suggesting an evidence-based faith ("evidence-based faith" is, after all, a definition of science) in the ability of the poemy cues in a poem to offer up pleasure and other shades of feeling, as well as the other points of interest that more straightforward, if less poemy, poems offer.

Generosity is always a difficult thing - once you begin to think about it. Biological case studies show powerful gift-giving urges in many species, often but not exclusively associated with sexual impulses. For the recipient, gifts can be very mysterious things indeed. I think of the track "A hymn for the postal service" on Hefner's album *Breaking God's heart*. Hefner are in the post-punk tradition of The Buzzcocks, whose "Ever fallen in love with someone you shouldn't have fallen in love?" still resonates, to me, as one of the simplest and best songs of this last quarter century.

In "A hymn" there is that familiar sense of being in the throes of enslaving emotions but the pace is slower, the narrative more complicated. The singer's object of desire, Lydia Pond, has moved to Paris to get away from British politics. There she sends back a passport photo of herself in pigtails and, to the singer's frustration and puzzlement, her letters "used the f-word / when she never ever spoke it". Here the gift - a letter between friends, not to mention lovers, is always a gift - becomes a sexual and social mystery. Is Lydia Pond teasing the singer? Does her swearing on paper suggest a new intimacy - either a lover's intimacy where next to nothing is barred, or, to the singer, merely a friend's intimacy (since some kinds of lovers' relationships may force each to be on their swearless best behaviour). Do the swear words suggest the promise of desire's ultimate closeness or friendship's ultimate distance? She promises him "they'll be creasing sheets" but a strong tone within the song is one of unluckiness, of the singer's failure and bewilderment. In the end the singer describes becoming faithful, not to Lydia, but to her letters: gift has become not intermediary but object of desire.

What is so ambiguous and tension-making about gifts actually contributes to their definition. The doubts and hints and selectivity, the half-obligations, the danger of giving too little, "being cheap", of giving too much: the impurities of the gift transaction, its snaggish social qualities, are critical to the sense of what gift is.

A gift given to a hoped-for lover, for instance, takes the risk that the loved one may not at all like this *particular* thing. Except for ironic purposes, it mustn't be an anodyne, generic gift that anyone would think "nice" or "dutiful". It must be specific to the person and so well-thought-out (but preferably not agonised over, preferably *as if* spontaneous), and it must, to some degree, confirm the receiver's own self-image without duplicating an item the receiver already has. How far from that self-image the gift may be is a fine judgement, and a judgement made in different ways for different lovers, since a gift ideally should represent something of what the giver takes to be important to him or herself: there is development and movement and progress in that, and again it is in this field of risky generosity where poems, those special gifts, best belong.