Actions & Travels

How Poetry Works

Anna Jackson

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‘I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action. His mind repeats that action and travels again through the action, but it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you’re different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference.’

Anne Carson

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Reading & writing poetry

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd – see here it is –
I hold it towards you.

This short poem by John Keats is the most haunting representation I know of the power of poetry to reach out to another person, even after death. Is it an icy hand, or a warm hand, that we grasp as readers? There is such a powerful warmth and urgency in the way the poet reaches out from this poem, it can feel as if it is the reader's own urgent responsibility to bring the poem, if not the poet himself, back to life. But there is also something a little chilling about being addressed like this from beyond the grave. All poetry collapses time, in the sense

that we read now what was written then, as if the present tense of the moment in which the poem was written can be carried across to the present tense in which we are reading. But the warmth of the 'living hand' being held out from 'the icy silence of the tomb' makes the strangeness of this present tense particularly unnerving.

Actions & Travels is about both the uncanny pleasure of reading poetry by writers who are now long dead – poetry which I find just as alive, just as intimate and compelling as if it were written yesterday – and the pleasure of reading work that actually *was* written yesterday. Sometimes it can feel even more uncanny to be given access to the inner world of someone you have stood beside at a bookshop or a party, or to know someone intimately only through words you have read online. 'Irreducible Sociality', a poem about *not* going to a party by the Chinese-American poet Chen Chen, ends with the lines, 'Don't be a stranger, but be / strange. Come by often for a cup of tea, // in all your unbridled unknowability.'

For some readers, contemporary poetry can seem icier in its unknowability than the poetry of the past. Written without rhyme or metre, what even makes it poetry? The line break? For other readers, contemporary poetry is just another form of conversation between friends – including strangers befriending themselves to their readers through their poetry – while poetry of the past seems unapproachable without a knowledge of metrical scansion or historical context. Yet if you relish the ingenious and outrageous arguments of Luke Kennard's wolf psychiatrist in poems like 'Wolf on the Couch' and 'Wolf Nationalist', it would be a pity to miss out on John Donne's equally ingenious arguments in poems like 'The Flea'. If you like to luxuriate in the lush imagery and gorgeous vocabulary of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' or Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', you might find yourself equally taken with the queasy gorgeousness you'll find in the poetry of young New Zealand poet Rebecca Hawkes. Bill Manhire's

'Across Brooklyn' is as simple and mysterious as W. B. Yeats's 'Song of Wandering Aengus' or Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods'. Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' presents an argument that Annie Finch responds to, centuries later, with her own 'Coy Mistress', and Frost's horse, momentarily stopped in the woods, is set back in motion with Richard Wilbur's heady poem 'The Ride'.

No particular scholarly knowledge is needed to read any of the poems discussed in this book, and the discussions that I offer are not themselves very scholarly. I just write about poems I love and what it is I love about them – the simplicity and resonance of the poems in Chapter One, the sumptuousness of the poems in Chapter Two, the concision of the poems in Chapter Three, what a licence to sprawl allows in the poems of Chapter Four, the challenges and possibilities of form in Chapter Five. Chapter Six looks at poems centred around conversations and argument, while Chapter Seven looks at how poems can also be in conversation (or in an argument) with poetry from the past. Chapter Eight is about how contemporary poetry is being shaped by the ways it is shared on the internet, and looks at the urgent political and social work much contemporary poetry is doing. Chapter Nine considers the intimate address that is often transferred from the reader to some other dear person or object (from nightingales to tombs) in the odes and epistles that change form over time. Chapter Ten concludes the book by looking at poets who are writing to the intimate audience posterity offers, wondering about what it gives the reading of a poem to be read, now, in a present that when the poem was written used to be the distant future.

Every chapter includes a range of poems from canonical poets – from William Shakespeare to William Carlos Williams – as well as poems from contemporary poets such as Alice Oswald and Terrance Hayes. Most chapters also include some works by writers who may not be so well known, such as New Zealand poets Ash Davida Jane and

Helen Rickerby. Since I live in New Zealand, I am familiar not only with poets like James K. Baxter and Bill Manhire, well known locally and internationally, but also with the younger poets whose readings see audiences often spilling out onto the footpaths outside overcrowded bookshops or bars, who make their own zines and publish more often on the internet than in print – among them, Hera Lindsay Bird, whose poem 'Monica' went viral around the world in 2016, Rebecca Hawkes and Tayi Tibble. New Zealand readers may be interested in the connections I trace between these poets' work and the work of more established poets, while readers from outside New Zealand will, I hope, be pleased to be introduced to poets whose work they may not have heard of.

A list of poems is given at the start of each chapter for those who would like to read and think about them before reading the chapter, forming their own sense of the poems that can be compared with mine. Links to all the poems can be found on my website, www.annajackson.nz/actions-and-travels. If the book is read from cover to cover, you will have read or reread one hundred poems. There is no better preparation, I believe, for reading poetry than reading poetry. As Robert Frost rather dauntingly put it, 'A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation. The thing is to get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars do.' If it is never possible to have read every poem ever written, it is always possible to expand our understanding of poetry with every additional poem we encounter.

At the end of this book is an appendix of writing suggestions for readers who write or might like to write poetry. Reading poetry often leads to writing poetry, as the American poet and essayist Brian

Blanchfield observes. Taking what has sometimes been seen as a problem – that poetry is mostly read only by other poets – Blanchfield points out that this suggests the act of reading poetry turns readers *into* poets and this is something we could celebrate. This is true, in a way, even when the reader *doesn't* go on to write their own poetry – to read poetry is to participate in the re-creation of the poem, its pattern of thought, its sensibility, its pacing, its tone. In poetry, more than in any other genre, Blanchfield writes, 'the sensations of reading are charged with the creative feeling of writing, and vice versa'.

If reading poetry is to become, in a sense, a poet, to go on and write new poetry can further transform our sense of the world around us, as well as our sense of self. I love the 2016 Jim Jarmusch film *Paterson* for its depiction of a poetry-writing bus driver who spends his days running lines of poetry through his head as he drives. His name, Paterson, and the town he lives in, pay homage to the poet William Carlos Williams, better known for his short, snapshot-like poems such as 'The Red Wheelbarrow' than for the book-length *Paterson*. The town as filmed by Jarmusch is full of the sorts of details that could belong in the poetry of Williams: the camera finds beauty in run-down buildings, small patches of decay, sunlight falling on streetscapes, people sitting on benches, suburban gardens and night rain. Paterson the character shows no interest himself in publishing his poetry, and while the poems we see him write (written for the film by poet Ron Padgett) are likeable enough he is not meant, I think, to be understood as an unrecognised genius, an Emily Dickinson figure. Yet like Dickinson, and like Williams, Paterson has an inner life lit up with aesthetic interest in the world's details.

The title of this book, *Actions & Travels*, comes from the description of poetry given by the Canadian poet Anne Carson in a *Paris Review* interview: 'I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to

enter into that action. And so his mind repeats that action and travels again through the action, but it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you're different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference.' The actions and travels of the title belong, then, as much to the reader as to the poet, and this book, too, is simply structured around a series of travels as I read my way through one poem after another, following and finding connections and comparisons, and inviting you to compare your own discoveries with mine.