**Charles Causley: Where Is He Now?**

In *Proofs and Theories*, contemplating courage in relation to poets and poetry, Louise Glück writes,

For poets, speech and fluency seem less an act of courage than a state of grace. The intervals of silence, however, require a stoicism very like courage; of these, no reader is aware.

I take these intervals of silence to be both literal and metaphorical. There are times of silence when no writing seems possible. There are also silences the poet has to enter in order to be able to hear the arrival of a poem and, more importantly perhaps, to endure the quietness before the arrival of sound. To be brave enough to weather these silences requires a degree of stoicism. In recognising this, Glück identifies an essential, but usually invisible part of the poet's process.

Stoicism was arguably stitched into Charles Causley's psyche from a very young age. When he was born in 1917, his father was away at war and his mother lived in a cottage by the river Kensey in Launceston, Cornwall. The words 'cottage' and 'Cornwall' usually evoke a romantic image - this cottage, though, often flooded when the river was in spate, it was damp and tiny, and the moment his mother saw a rat scurrying around by Causley's cot she decided they had to move. They translated their home to a tenement on nearby St. Thomas's hill. Causley's mother took in washing to earn money, and from time to time they went to the Methodist Chapel on a Tuesday to collect a food parcel. At the end of the war Causley's father came home from the war with a disability pension and, after suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis, died five years later.

From a young age, Causley was a devoted reader, an avid writer and had a great gift for music. His mother found enough money to pay for piano lessons and in his teens Causley joined a dance band. Although they found work all over Cornwall, Causley wryly commented that they should not have been paid for their services but fined. At the age of fifteen he left school and started work in the office of a local building firm. He wrote plays, poems and short stories, but the defining moment of his life came in 1939 when he became a coder for the Royal Navy.

Causley hated being at sea, loathed the war, detested wearing a uniform. In 'Recruiting Drive' he writes,

You must take off your clothes for the doctor

And stand as straight as a pin,

His hand of stone on your white breastbone

Where all the bullets go in.

As someone familiar with the desolation of poverty and war, he was not afraid of wearing his heart on his sleeve. There is no attempt to glamorise or to salute heroism. Instead he writes eulogies and bleak reminders of the fact that war was, is and always will be about death. That said, he did discover a love of travel and like many men from a working-class background travel might never have happened had it not been for the navy. He later claimed that the education he gained during his years of active service was his equivalent of 'Oxford and Cambridge and Eton and Harrow'.

Causley trained as a teacher after the war then returned to Launceston where he lived for the rest of his life. In 1952 he bought Cyprus Well, a house named after the nearby Saxon spring on Ridgegrove Hill. In 'Sibard's Well' he writes:

Yet underfoot is still the sound

At last of night, at first of day,

Its country silences, a thin

Language of water through the clay.

Ridgegrove Hill is on the edge of town. It sweeps steeply down and snuckles into a tree-fringed pocket of isolation. The well can no longer be seen, but at the bottom of the hill is the river Kensey, and just fifteen minutes walk away you come to the Tamar, the river that both divides and joins Cornwall from and to Devon and the rest of the country. It is here that Causley found a reservoir of silence and the opportunity to hear the language of water, as he calls it - undoubtedly a nod of gratitude to the muse herself.

To enter Cyprus Well you take two steps down into a small hall and then into the living room. As soon as you have done this, you are enveloped in quietness. Turn left through a door, cross a tiny passageway and you enter Causley's study, the most remarkable room in the house. There is only one window, and that window looks not onto the street but the back garden. The quiet is so intense in here that it becomes a substance, a materiality that is not necessarily the absence of sound, but a quality of soundlessness that is made in the same way that sound is made, in the same way that copper is burnished, by touch, by repetition, by daily engagement with the creation of sound and the spaces between those sounds. In here, he wrote and edited his poems, played piano, looked at paintings, listened to music and read. As a man who valued solitude and the opportunity to apply himself wholeheartedly to his work, he is also said to have hidden from people in here when they came visiting on bank holidays. If they were persistent, he might even nip over the back fence and into his neighbour's house where he could escape the public eye and safely pretend not to be in.

In this room Causley went on to write many of the poems for which he became known and loved. It is mystifying to note that just twelve years after his death, none of his books of poems for adults are still in print. Let's remember that he was nominated to be Poet Laureate by Ted Hughes; he was awarded the Queen's gold medal for poetry, a CBE, an honourary doctorate from Exeter University; and he was also elected as Companion of Literature by the Royal Society of Literature. These awards and accolades did not come to Causley by chance or luck. His writing is full of wit and compassion, and his dexterity with language can make you gasp. Take this stanza from 'The Sheep on Blackening Fields' for instance:

In the sharp river's gut

Fish and blurred stars unfreeze;

Unclench at the moor's side

The fists of trees.

Each time I read this I am startled by the unclenching of trees. Even though I've read it a hundred times, it never ceases to surprise me. How does he do that, how did he arrive at such a startling way of bringing me into the thaw? In the previous stanza, he has given me a 'sapping sun' that 'annihilates the snow'. I don't know of any other writer who has brought such energy to a melt, such violence, such a sense of the body of snow being forcibly transformed from one thing to another.

Many of Causley's poems are set in Cornwall and although he drew upon the richness of his Cornish voice and vision he refused to see himself as a 'professional Cornishman'. Instead he held a fine balance between being faithful to the genius loci at the same time as knowing that the land of the imagination has no borders, no boundaries, no flags. Edith Sitwell, in the forward to one of his collections, wrote that his poems 'are among the natural growths of our soil'. In 'The Seasons In North Cornwall', spring lights green fuses and in winter 'all Cornwall thunders' at his door. In 'Trevethy Quoit' we see:

Sea to the north, the south.

At the moor's crown

Thin field, hard-won, turns on

The puzzle of stones.

Causley embraces mystery: the puzzle of stones is heeded, experienced, given space without any need for explanation. Equally, in 'Healing A Lunatic Boy', he resists any temptation to offer easy answers or solutions preferring instead to take us into the world of the thing itself, into core of it, into the pulse of its existence,

Trees turned and talked to me,

Tigers sang,

Houses put on leaves,

Water rang.

Causley's range was expansive and based upon acute observation. 'Ten Types of Hospital Visitor' gives us exactly what the title suggests - ten different types of visitor who come to visit a patient's sick bed, some of whom you will no doubt recognise if you have ever been in hospital. The poem is searingly witty and full of poignant insights. His hugely popular poems 'I Saw A Jolly Hunter' and 'Timothy Winters' are again rich with humour, but they are also deeply political. In the latter, Causley leaves you in no doubt as to the devastation of poverty in childhood: 'He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor /

And they say there aren't boys like him any more'. In the former, with its repeated mimicry ('jolly') of the upper-classes and their pomposity it's the hunter and not the hare who ends up getting shot:

Bang went the jolly gun.

Hunter jolly dead.

Jolly hare got clean away.

Jolly good, I said.

The ability to successfully mix politics and humour in a poem is rare, and Causley manages to do it in a way that makes me wish he were still alive and writing now.

Many of Causley's poems fulfill Emily Dickinson's requirement that a poem should take the top of your head off. He can do this deftly and instantaneously as we see here, in a stanza from 'On Launceston Castle':

Westward, a cardiograph

Of granite, Bodmin Moor;

Its sharp, uncertain stream

Knifing the valley floor.

Not only is the valley floor knifed, but I am knifed too when I read this. Cut through by the blade of the stream. The sheer belting energy of the verb abstracts me from my daily self and sends me shooting off elsewhere. And then there's the cardiograph, which gives me not only the image of rock strata, but the heartbeat of the land, the driver that sets the blood pumping around the rest of the country. Again and again Causley writes poems that derange the senses - and by this I mean that he comes from a place that Rimbaud would have approved of, one not hemmed in, or dictated by the social straight-jacket of middle-class society. There is a rawness to his perception, a bravery that catapults him into truths that might otherwise evade us. I don't say this lightly - and I'm aware that this might not apply to all of his poems but there are enough to let me assert this with confidence. Causley writes ballads, rhyming poems, free verse poems - he listens to the music not only of the word but also to the music of folklore and local history. He does not rate one form of writing above another, and this too makes him deeply unusual.

In one of his best-loved poems, 'I Am The Song', we are given a song that sings the origin of the world. It begins:

I am the song that sings the bird.

I am the leaf that grows the land.

I am the tide that moves the moon.

I am the stream that halts the sand.

The deceptive simplicity of this poem might lead a reader to think that not much is going on here: it's only nine lines long, has a regular rhyme scheme and rhythm and uses transparent, one-syllable words. However, the very premise that the poem is based upon turns our ideas about creation upside down. The bird no longer sings a song - instead, the song sings the bird, the leaf grows the land, the tide moves the moon. Causley has flipped the world as we have been taught to see it into a strange new place, and thanks to this we see it again, meet it as if for the first time in all its wonderful strangeness. In addition, the 'I' now becomes the creator and that which is created. If we read this poem out loud, our connection to the world, our involvement in its existence starts to change. It ends, 'I am the word that speaks the man' and we suddenly feel a sense of both how small and how vast we can be.

One of the highlights of 2014 was a visit I made to the Causley archive at Exeter University. I had booked myself in for the day, and chosen a selection of manuscripts to look at. Nothing could have prepared me, though, for that first moment when I opened a ribbon-tied, innocuous-looking beige folder. Something - let's call it light or energy - rose up from his writing. This sense of something lifting out of his work was no doubt enhanced by the fact that he often wrote on yellow paper. It was more than that though. It was a moment of intimacy, of seeing how he wrote, how he shaped letters, crossed-out words, ranged from one line to the next, and through that intimacy, through the nearness of his breath to the page, the stroke of his hand across that page, something reached through time and space and touched me, drew me in, and would have brought me to my knees if I had not already been sitting down.

I am aware that this may sound like hyperbole - but let's also take into consideration the fact that I had been living in this poet's house for four months as poet-in-residence. I had been working in his study, sitting in his chairs, living inside the bricks and windows that had sheltered him from the world for more than forty years. I had been walking the streets of Launceston where he used to walk, visiting his grave each week with fresh flowers, meeting people who knew him and listening to their stories - in other words I had already been cultivating a relationship with him not only through his work but also through the place where he lived. To see and read the original drafts of his work was a moment I will never forget. It was as if the flame of imagination flared up in honour of a man who dedicated his life to nurturing it not only in himself but in the children he taught and in many of the poets he knew during his lifetime, including Jack Clemo and Siegfried Sassoon.

The archive also gave something else away. Charles Causley was a man who worked hard. The poems have been through draft after draft. Verbs have been revised, changed, changed again until he finds the one that works best. It was fascinating to trace the provenance of some of his poems, to follow the line of genesis back to the beginning, which was often remarkably different from the finished thing. Most poets know this, of course, but many readers have no idea how much labour goes into the making of a poem that may end up being little more than ten lines long. I felt, on that day, like an apprentice looking at a master's spells, at all the experiments that had gone into making them work, making them potent enough to conjure.

Charles Causley was graced not only with the fluency that Glück mentions at the beginning of this article, but also a degree of stoicism that allowed him to withstand long intervals of silence. In 'The Swan', the narrator of the poem reflects upon the process of writing. He begins with 'It is a music of the eye', then goes on to locate the soul of poetry, scatheless, in Apollo's breast. It is the ending, though, that connects us most strikingly with Glück's observations, for here the narrator acknowledges that poetry endures 'from year to turning year' and,

That all who would receive it may be blessed

Each for a separate joy, a separate wound,

In voiceless song. Listen, and you shall hear.

These lines take us into the paradox at the heart of poetry. Blessed with a joy and a wound, the poet receives a voiceless song. In order to receive this song he must actively enter a state of receptivity and then, stoically, follow the best advice that can be given to a writer: to listen. Then, if you're lucky and if you listen for long enough, you will hear what you have been waiting for.

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