

95. The World as Meditation by Wallace Stevens – A Friend to David Lewsey

Michael Shaeffer

Hello and welcome to The Poetry Exchange. I'm Michael Shaeffer. I'm not quite sure how to do this, but I'm afraid I have some desperately sad news to share with you, which is that my dear friend Fiona passed away on Tuesday 6th August.

Regular listeners will be aware that Fi had not been able to record these little introductions that we do for the last couple of months. She became ill quite suddenly, and it turned out that she had an inoperable and untreatable form of cancer.

I hope it will be of some comfort to you to know that she passed away peacefully, and that throughout her illness, she remained steadfastly herself in all of the ways.

This project was, of course, Fiona's brainchild, combining some of her great passions: poetry itself, her passion for spoken poetry - voiced poetry, as she might say - and people and conversations, and friends. And I've been lucky enough to share in that journey with Fi, and I've been lucky enough to call her a very dear friend.

I saw Fi in hospital, and I had a really beautiful conversation with her the last time I saw her, and she told me that she really wanted this episode to go out. I know that she really loved our guest's passion for this poem and for poetry.

Fiona of course touched so many lives in really tangible ways. Fiona was one of those people that made things happen. Some of us just talk about doing stuff, but Fiona did it, and she followed through with the most incredible work ethic and attention to detail. It was really important to Fiona to do things well, and she approached everything in her life with that mindset. She used to drive me nuts! Sometimes we'd have hours of conversation around the project and what we wanted to do, and strategizing, and then of course making the book together. I'd have to take breaks, I'd have to call it a break, and Fi would just keep going. She was just extraordinary, and she has built a community of people around this project and in other areas of her life. Fi had this gift for kind of spotting talent in people or something that was interesting or unique, and she kind of – she both collected people and connected people. She really did make a difference in the world, and she really did make the world a better place. And I know that from some of the messages we receive from listeners, and I know how

much those messages meant to Fiona - to know that the work she was doing with this project was touching people's lives and was making a difference.

As a poet, Fiona was really blossoming and maturing, increasingly finding herself on shortlists and longlists for various poetry prizes, and following the publication of *The Poetry Exchange Anthology*, her attention was turning to putting out her first collection of her own poems. And I'm really pleased to be able to tell you that at some point later this year, that collection is going to be published, thanks in no small part to the incredible efforts of two of Fiona's poetry mentors - Glynn Maxwell and Tamar Yoseloff. I will keep you updated when I know more about that, and once we've established a publication date.

I've known Fi for just over 20 years. I think we first met on a production of 'The Threepenny Opera' with the National Theatre education department, and then we've been in each other's lives in many ways, and we've done this project together for 10 years, and her passing leaves an enormous hole in my life. And I know that's true of many, many others. And of course, I especially want to extend my deepest sympathies to Fiona's family and to her partner, Tim.

We always ask the question of our contributors, our guests: "if this poem were a friend, what kind of a friend would it be?" And Fiona has been all sorts of friends to me. We have laughed an enormous amount - maybe I should put out some of the outtakes of us trying to do these intros - and we've had adventures, and we've traveled. And if I've had something difficult going on in my life, Fiona was always one of the very first people that I would call and she would always respond in such a deeply caring, intuitive, wise, thoughtful way. And again, I know that's true of so many other people. Fiona was a real one-off. She really was one of the very best.

I really hope it will be of some comfort to others of you listening, who I know will be experiencing the shock of this, yeah, I hope it will be of some comfort to be able to hear her still. There are some other eps in the can that feature Fiona, and John, who helps us in all sorts of amazing ways put everything together, he and I are having conversations about future episodes and what we might do.

So you'll be hearing Fiona and myself talking about 'The World as Meditation' by Wallace Stevens - the poem that's been a friend to David.

Michael Shaeffer

Before we get into discussing the poem, would you mind reading it out loud for us?

David Lewsey

Okay, I will do my best. Thank you.

The World as Meditation

by Wallace Stevens

J'ai passé trop de temps à travailler mon violon, à voyager. Mais l'exercice essentiel du compositeur—la méditation—rien ne l'a jamais suspendu en moi ... Je vis un rêve permanent, qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour. – George Enesco [N.B. epigraph not read as part of the conversation]

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.
That winter is washed away. Someone is moving

On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she dwells.

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.

The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.
No winds like dogs watched over her at night.

She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone.
She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace
And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day.

It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement.
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.

Fiona Bennett

Oh, beautifully read.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah, thank you.

David Lewsey

Thank you. Can I tell you maybe to start why I feel so personally connected to this poet?

Fiona Bennett

Yes, that's an excellent place to start.

David Lewsey

I went to a terrible school. I failed my 11 Plus [exam], and had lots of sort of sense about whether I could ever understand any of this kind of stuff. I knew I loved poetry from a very young age, connected through Bob Dylan's references to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and so on and so forth. Anyway, I finally went and did a degree as a mature student in those lovely days towards the end of the 70s, I was in the library, and I just fell upon this book, and I first I read Wallace Stevens' poem 'Sunday Morning.' And I'd never heard of Wallace Stevens, and nobody had told me about Wallace Stevens. He was not somebody that anybody had introduced me to. I found him. Now, at the time I found him, I didn't know that he was a giant, you know, I knew nothing. And then the next poem I came across was this one, and I didn't - I couldn't understand it, and it took me years to kind of get a reading together. But it was just something about it that I thought was beautiful, that was meaningful. I was attracted by the sort of mystery, the sort of yearning within it. Some of the language is so simple and I had an immediate kind of visceral, emotional connection to it, which was strengthened by the fact that I had found him, that nobody had introduced me to him. So there's that very real, early connection, and this poem in particular has been a friend to me since that time, because it is – it's a miracle. This poem is a miracle. It's a miracle in the way that Vermeer's Lace Maker is a miracle or a late Rembrandt self portrait. They are miracles of what it is to be human and to try and find expression. So I'm making big claims for this poem, and I'm very happy to give you a lay reading as to why I think it meets those claims.

Michael Shaeffer

That's incredible. Thanks, David. I really connected with that thing of you making the discovery and that sense of ownership that I certainly have when I discover a band or a poem or something like that, it's not that somebody else has told you; you've really got that for yourself in quite a different way, I think. I love that.

Fiona Bennett

I noticed that you slipped into the middle of that, that it took you many years to get a reading of it, as you described it. But that in and of itself is fascinating to me, that it caught you in such a manner that you stayed with it for years.

David Lewsey

It's hard to believe when you think back to 1977: Stevens is a giant; there was nothing in the library about him. Now with the internet, there are bloggers out there, there's stuff on YouTube, and there's a fantastic sort of body of interpretation out there. But what I have loved about this is that, because I met it before then, and I sought guidance as to what it was about from the Academy over the years, but in the end, so much of that is so complex that in the end I'm satisfied with my own lay connection and my own lay reading.

Fiona Bennett

Great. That's fantastic. It's like what you want to be saying to every student of poetry, I feel. Yes, let's do all the studying, let's get all the, as you call it, the Academy. Let's get all the knowledge and do all that...and let's also know that actually our own connection and emotional response and intuitive knowledge is where the heartbeat is.

David Lewsey

That's right. But also it goes to that thing about once it's out there in the world, we have a relationship with it, which is our relationship, our connection. And I think that as long as we are respectful to the poet's intentions, then I think our connection is valid.

Michael Shaeffer

Couldn't agree more with that. I think that's one of the things I've really learned through doing this project with Fiona for however many years now, because – I think a bit like you were hinting at at the beginning, David – at school, poetry...I couldn't really get hold of it. I thought I was getting it wrong, you know, and it's to sort of let go of that idea of there being a right and a wrong. I thought it had to be solved. But to sort of allow yourself that and to acknowledge the validity of your own personal response is just so important.

David Lewsey

So important.

Michael Shaeffer

Before we get into the poem itself, I think it might be useful just to sort of lay out a little bit the sort of background of the story here. So we've got Ulysses, who in the Greek myth is Odysseus, and so he is coming back from the Trojan War. It's 20 years it takes him to get back. And Penelope is his wife, and there's this story that she's sewing, is it a shroud or something she's creating?

David Lewsey

For her...I think it's for his father.

Michael Shaeffer

Oh, for his father, okay, I see. And there's a thing that once she finishes it, she then has to marry somebody else.

David Lewsey

Choose a suitor. Yes, that's right.

Michael Shaeffer

She has to choose from one of the many suitors that are there. And so what she does is she sews it, and then at night, she unpicks it so she never finishes it.

David Lewsey

Yes. To my lay reading, it is absolutely essential to understand why he's chosen that myth to form this poem, and why it is so important that Penelope - and he mentions the cretonnes, which is the lace, the fabric - because she is the creator. She is the creator, and she is the un-picker. And although that's not explicit in the poem, it is implicit in the understanding of what he's trying to do here.

Fiona Bennett

So, tell us why. The significance of the choice of this mythological story, for you.

David Lewsey

It's important to understand that the heart of Stevens' intentions and his poetic project was to provide something in his word that would 'suffice' in the face of what has been described around that time as our disinheritance from those meaningful stories that gave our life meaning. So it's a bit of a cliché, but the whole sort of Nietzsche and The Death of God. So he's faced with this at this time, the beginning of the last century, with what is the purpose of the artistic endeavor in the face of our disinheritance from those old meanings? And Stevens' project was not simply to explain that, but to

create things which of themselves replaced what was no longer meaningful. Well, you're not laughing at me, so that's a good sign.

Michael Shaeffer

It's great. I just want you to keep going David!

David Lewsey

So I think that he chooses Ulysses, he chooses the Odyssey because it's a pre-Christian myth. Because it goes to a time when we had that inheritance. The beautiful thing about it is, if we take that seriously, what I'm proposing, there was a time when Ulysses was with Penelope. He was there in the same way that there was a time when we, in the historical sense, had a home, we were at home. And our home may have been in acts of the imagination that we value as acts of the imagination, but we no longer believe in. But Ulysses was in Ithaca, he was at home. And I think that, to me, that's really important.

Michael Shaeffer

Can you explain that a little bit more, why that's so important for you that he was at home, that there was a time when he was?

David Lewsey

The fact that it's Ulysses arriving home, the journey home, and I'm thinking of home here as a place in which we have...we have meaning. And so the fact that he chooses Ulysses, and that in that story Ulysses was at home, he went away, and someone is yearning for him to return, as we yearn to have meaning in our lives, on that grand scale...

Michael Shaeffer

Oh, I see what you're saying.

David Lewsey

And so what I think Stevens would say to us is this poem as a whole, will it suffice? Does it offer something as an act of the imagination? One of the crucial parts of this is it is a very simple domestic scene. Taken on face value, Penelope is waking up in the morning. She has unpicked what she created the day before - the act of creation. 'Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east, / The interminable adventurer?' You know, 'the interminable adventurer', I mean, I think that's quite funny, you know. When the bloody hell is he coming home, you know? But of course, also rising in the east, it's the sun. One of the layers in this and in Stevens' other work, is this process of nature. Later on in the poem he says, 'it's only day...it was only day.' Well, that's all we have. We only have day. We live now. So there's this sense in which it is the sun rising, and he conflates Ulysses and the sun rising, and she, in

the poem, is aware of this. Is it the sun on her pillow? Is it him returning? There are so many layers going on here. But as I said, at the root of it is this sort of domestic scene of her waking in the morning, which is extremely beautiful.

Michael Shaeffer

That's incredible. You've opened up the whole thing for me there, David. 'Someone is moving / On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.' It's Ulysses, and it's the sun, yeah, yeah. That's brilliant. My mind's just gone 'boof', like that!

David Lewsey

And his language, he's like: 'whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she dwells.' So on the level of the world of the poem, you know, there we are in Ithaca, the sun is rising, it's morning, she feels the heat, and it is literally awakening the world. But if the sun and Ulysses represent our imaginative impulse, then that too awakens the world in which we dwell, of which this poem is a part. And this...in the third stanza: 'She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him, / Companion to his self for her, which she imagined, / Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.' I mean, I just find that...we do this, we compose, we imagine, we have created all that meaning, which we have now disherited. I don't mean to be disrespectful to people who are religious, but, you know, I don't know whether it's true. I don't think it is, but it is a wonderful act of the imagination that has created that account of what it is to be human. And Penelope is doing this this morning, and she has done it so long, and she is the actor. She is us and all of us through history who have imaginatively created this self, this account of what it is to be human. And I love, I love the 'two in a deep-founded sheltering.' I mean, it's so beautiful - 'sheltering, friend and dear friend.' I mean, so simple. And it's, you know, it's a loving relationship, even though, you know, this thing is on one level incredibly abstract, and yet on this other level that we talked about, this sort of domestic scene, it is *super human*.

David Lewsey

So 'the trees are mended' - for years, believe me, for years it was like, 'what the bloody hell?!' 'The trees are mended'?! So my trying to find a sense of this is, so, two things: in the world of the poem, when he left, he sailed away. What did he sail away in? He sailed away in a boat. What was that boat made out of? It was made out of wood, so they would have cut down a fair number of trees in order to build that boat for him to leave. And over time, that space, they have mended. And that also goes to the...later where he talks about 'an inhuman meditation.' So the trees are mended 'as an essential exercise / In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.' And that inhuman meditation is nature, is the sun rising, is the world in the title - 'The World as Meditation' - it is that process that we live within, which acts beyond us.

Michael Shaeffer

For me, because we've got: 'The trees are mended. / That winter is washed away', I thought it was like, oh, the leaves that had obviously fallen in the autumn, and then the trees are bare throughout the winter, that it's the spring. It's the leaves coming out on the trees.

David Lewsey

That fits completely and, absolutely, the rebirth, the process of the rebirth. I'd be very interested in your interpretation of the 'no winds.' Mine is again this idea: well, if there's no winds, how is Ulysses going to come home? So there is a sense in which Stevens is saying - I don't want to push this too hard - but the waiting for him to come home, we have a realization that maybe he will never come home in that sense. So again, going to my contention about finding new meaning, about what will suffice, it is our realization that what we replace the old with may not be sufficient.

Fiona Bennett

It feels like a kind of existential moment, doesn't it? It's right in the middle that line. It feels like the whole poem kind of goes 'whooooorrrp' [sound of something coming suddenly to a stop]. Like all that energy is stopped for a minute, just as it stops when there is no wind. The word desire comes in somewhere.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah, the next stanza, yeah.

Fiona Bennett

It's like he takes us to the place of non-possibility, in order to make us recognize that we must listen to that desire, we must pay attention.

David Lewsey

Yeah, absolutely. And, and how beautiful is that, that stanza: 'She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone. / She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace / And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.' And you know, again, in the story of the world of the poem, we know that she's faithful, we know that she yearns for him to come home, we know he's trying to come home. But in the sense of that level of finding meaning, we might say the new meaning that we want, we want it to be pure and simple, we don't want it to be adorned. What comes we want to be authentic. That's the word, authentic. And then he says - he poses the question 'is it Ulysses that approaches from the east?' at the beginning - 'But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun / On her pillow?' For me, he's saying, well, if it is only the warmth of the sun on the pillow, maybe that's enough. Maybe in

that moment of feeling that warmth on our pillow, that that might be enough, that might suffice. 'The thought kept beating in her like her heart.' Her heart that keeps her alive, the very essence of who she is. 'The two kept beating together.' So the thought of the warmth of the sun and her heart, and Penelope and Ulysses, our imagination and meaning. 'It was only day.' I've already suggested we only have days, and at night, what we've created, we unpick and we start again. And then this - this in the early days, like completely freaked me out – what is going on?! – 'It was Ulysses and it was not.' And my answer to that is: this poem is Ulysses and it's not. This poem is the embodiment of a new kind of meaning. 'Yet they had met.' So again in the world of the poem, of course they'd met, they'd been married, they had... 'but [sic] they had met / Friend and dear friend' - again, this simple phrase, which is so beautiful - 'and a planet's encouragement.' What's that about? Well, the sun, the sun, our planet and the sun. We say the sun comes up; well, the sun's not moving. The sun's not the interminable adventurer; we are. The earth is. It is our planet which is encouraging us, every day to renew and have that imagination. And then this incredible line: 'The barbarous strength within her would never fail.' I mean...

Michael Shaeffer

I wanted to ask you about that. That's such an interesting line, isn't it?

David Lewsey

Originally, you know, I didn't care. It was so beautiful. Yes, it was so beautiful. It is so beautiful. It 'would never fail.' And again, you know, I want to stress, this is my theory and this is my fancy way of putting it; no, this *is* it. This line is it. 'The barbarous strength'. But if we have to say, what does it mean? It is - it is us. It is the strength of the imagination. It is that seeking after meaning, after a home, the fulfillment of that yearning, the fulfillment of 'the final fortune of their desire' will never fail. We will always have that. And that's, that's a wonderful thing that we have to embrace.

Michael Shaeffer

Sorry, David, why is it barbarous? What does that mean? Barbaric? Barbarous?

David Lewsey

Well, exactly...you're so right. Because earlier he talks about 'savage presence', he talks about 'inhuman meditation.' And then when we think about inhuman you know, we think about what's happening in the world at the moment. And I think these three phrases - 'savage', 'inhuman', 'barbarous' - remind us that what it is to be human has this element of savagery, of the barbarous within it.

Michael Shaeffer

For me, it kind of seems to speak to the sort of the essence of who we are as animals, you know, not as these civilized people that kind of talk about nice things.

David Lewsey

That's why, again, this is a miracle, because so much of this is gentle and light and questioning and kind of quite cool, and he just sort of slips these phrases in to, as you say, to remind us of what is at the core of what it is to be human. And this final line, this is the one that just, I thought, oh my God, this is a miracle: 'Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.' If all we have in our sort of modern, postmodern world, where we have - for many of us, not all of us, of course - have lost so much of those old assurances and meanings, what, what might we have? Well, we never forget him - Ulysses - meaning home, imagination, adventurer, and how every day (sun rises, we live in days) keeps coming constantly so near. And *that*, maybe, in our now, is sufficient, will suffice. And this poem is the embodiment of that...speaks to that too. *Is that thing.*

Michael Shaeffer

What's really interesting to me here, David is that, you know, the conclusion of the poem isn't that Ulysses comes home. It's not his return. It's the promise of his return? It's 'never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.' So there's a proximity, but not a...not a meeting.

David Lewsey

Yes, he's not quite home, but our sense of him, and what he represents, it is renewed every day. Every day we renew this activity of creating meaning through the act of our imagination. And you know, in the end, as I said, it is the poem. When you read the poem again, what we're left with is - okay, what we've talked about, wonderful ideas and interpretations - but it's the poem. Now I recognize in a postmodern world that people might say: well, the very idea that you're putting forward, and that Stevens was attempting to do, is his old hat. But I would argue very strongly that we still need meaning in the world and to recognize that we create it, and it has to be about 'friends and dear friends.' It's important.

Fiona Bennett

And I think the idea that...that a work of art...that the thing itself has an effect...is fantastic.

Michael Shaeffer

This feels slightly reductive, but of course we do always ask all of our guests: if this poem were a friend, what type of friend would it be to you?

David Lewsey

I'll tell you. I'll tell you. This is the kind of friend who comes to your house and takes you out into a field on a hot summer's night under a billion stars, and says: 'I know you are afraid to dance and you are afraid to sing, and when you have sung and danced you are hoarse and you are in a whirl...' And this friend says: 'Live, live every day, and create.' That's what this friend is to me.

David Lewsey

And can I finally - I know you've been very kind and given me plenty of time - can I just say something very quickly that I'd like to say to both of you. My wife and I, we practice a form of Japanese Buddhism, and part of that is that each day we chant in the morning, we chant in the evening. Part of our practice, if we choose - free choice - the president of our organization, Daisaku Ikeda [2 January 1928 - 15 November 2023], he gives us inspiration every day. And today's inspiration is as follows, and if this doesn't blow your mind, nothing will: "We should all develop the mind to rejoice in, praise and share in the gift of those who have artistic talents and a richness of heart, whether they achieve wide recognition or not. Cultivating such a beautiful mind is a very worthy effort. Culture and art are not just decorations. They are not just accessories. What matters is where the culture enriches the essential substance of our lives." I read that to you because what you guys are doing is that. You guys, through The Poetry Exchange and The Muse Club and all the other work you do, is enriching the essential substance of our lives. And I'm incredibly grateful personally, and I'm sure all your listeners and your supporters are grateful too. You are doing a great thing. Thank you.

Michael Shaeffer and Fiona Bennett

Ah, David.

Michael Shaeffer

That's such a beautiful thing to hear. I really, really appreciate that.

Fiona Bennett

And what a gift. I mean, you said before you read that if your mind isn't blown by this, I don't know what is, but my mind was already well...!!

Michael Shaeffer

Exactly right, exactly right!

David Lewsey

That's today's guidance. That's not me going and finding that. That's today. I read it this morning and thought, oh my god, you know this is...yeah, and I'm a materialist, you know, I'm entirely...materialist, you know, I don't...anyway, you do great work. Thank you.

Fiona Bennett

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Michael Shaeffer

That, of course, was Fiona with that really beautiful reading. Just so incredible to hear her, yeah, her care and her appreciation of the poem and her deep humanity coming through so clearly in that reading.

I'd like to thank David Lewsey for his time in giving us the conversation and for allowing us to use this conversation in what is obviously not an easy episode. And also for his very kind words, which we chose to leave in. Often people will say lovely things about the project, and mostly we haven't included them in episodes, but it felt appropriate somehow to include that sort of tribute that David made at the end of our conversation. So thank you, David, and to Alfred A. Knopf, who is the publisher and allowed us to use that poem.

As I said at the beginning, I know that this is going to come as a big shock to many of you, and if it's useful, I just wanted to say that if anyone wants to get in touch with us to say something, maybe to leave your own tribute to Fiona, probably the best way of doing that is through the email address: hello@thepoetryexchange.co.uk. We'd love to hear from you.

And we do have another, at least one other episode featuring Fiona at her glorious best, and we'll be putting that one out at some point in about a month. So hopefully you'll join us for that.

Thank you for being a part of The Poetry Exchange community that meant so much to Fiona, and thank you for listening.

Credits:

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