

Skirrid Hill – Grandfathers, Fathers and Sons

Teacher John Hathaway looks at the importance of inheritance and the way that both living and dead relatives carry forward their influence into future lives, in the work of poet Owen Sheers.

It seems a general truism that the older we become, the greater our understanding of life and humanity. It is quite bold, therefore, for Owen Sheers to select an epigraph to begin his collection that directly contradicts this idea. Epigraphs are carefully selected by authors to summarise and point towards some of the main ideas in their work. It is thus of value to spend some time considering the following quotation from Eliot's 'The Four Quartets':

As we grow older

*The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living.*

What stands out is the use of comparatives: 'older', 'stranger' and 'more complicated' point towards a perspective that is ever-changing as we age. 'Pattern' implies some sort of system or order, and yet the 'pattern' of life is not so simple as a youthful perspective indicates. In particular, what makes life more complex is the relationship between 'dead and living'. This juxtaposition suggests that what makes our lives 'more complicated' as we age is both our relationship with those who are, or who will be, no longer with us and our increasing awareness of mortality. The use of the pronoun 'we' makes it clear that from the outset Sheers invites his readers to reflect on these aspects of the strangeness of life as he attempts to engage in poetically exploring his own developing understanding of relationships between the generations.

'Trees' – Faith in the Future

One of the reasons why Sheers is such an interesting poet is the way in which his work is so obviously influenced by other poets, as the dedication to 'Inheritance' makes clear. 'Trees' is clearly indebted to Larkin's 'The Trees', which presents trees as a symbol of the cycle of nature and the continuity of life vis-à-vis the transitory nature of human existence. The symbolic nature of the father's act in planting a tree to mark the birth of each of his children, 'one for each of us' surrounding the 'house', paints a rich picture of the nature of fatherhood: allowing trees to be rooted in home soil is a metaphorical description of the job of any parent, and one which Sheers, as his poetry testifies, has hugely benefitted from, as he takes such strength from his family and his Welsh identity. This impression is further strengthened by the location of each of these trees, positioned at the 'north, south and west', perhaps indicating the way in which parenting is presented as providing your children with firm bearings they can use to navigate their way through life.

Yet the father's choice to plant a tree now that his children have grown up initially mystifies the speaker: the question he asks his father reveals his ignorance of the value of planting a tree that his father will never see 'fully grown'. The father's recondite response, 'Some time', triggers an epiphany in the speaker that is expressed in the final long sentence that closes the poem and stretches over the final four stanzas. The new 'oak' tree – known for its durability – is described in terms that emphasise both its frailty and potential. It is a 'finger-thick sapling', highlighting its youth and weakness, left to the mercy of the elements. Yet at the same time it is metaphorically presented as a 'long bow' which is 'loaded with the promise of what it will become'. The reference to the 'long bow' is a clear indication of Sheers' Welsh heritage, as knowledge of the use of the long bow was passed down from father to son, yet at the same time this image is one of unbounded potential, as the adjective 'loaded' suggests. What Sheers comes to understand about his father is that he is able to plant a tree and see within it something of the promise of what it will become in the future, which is analogous with the role of a parent. As yet, the tree is merely 'silhouetted', its future lacking form and definition, but the clear focus is on 'what it will become', which may only be evident once the father has died. The emphatic single line final stanza – a common feature of Sheers' poetry – makes this clear by identifying the ambiguity of the 'reddening sky' that could indicate the 'setting or the rising of a sun.' The homophonic pun of 'sun' that closes the poem suggests that the very act of planting a tree – or raising a child – is a radical act of faith in the future, one that marks the inevitability of your own demise as much as it does the future growth and development of what you have 'planted'.

'Farther' – Changing Roles

Sheers is the master of the multivalent title, and 'Farther' is no exception, connoting distance and separation – a thematic concern of the collection as a whole, as the title indicates – but also being a homophone of 'father'. The intimate and confessional single stanza creates a sense of separation through the distance that builds up between the father and son on their walk up Skirrid Fawr, the pronouns shifting from 'We' to 'I' and 'you'. Yet what causes this distance is the increasing age and vulnerability of the father, with his breath emerging 'short and sharp and solitary', the sibilance emphasising the father's struggle to breathe as he climbs the hill. This reminds the son once again of

*the tipping of the scales of us,
the intersection of our ages.*

Such a powerful image reflects the interchange of roles as the son comes to care for his father because of the father's increased frailty and the son's greater strength and maturity. In spite of this separation, however, the shift back to the pronoun 'we' as they reach the summit of the hill and 'share the shock of a country unrolled before us', creates a moment of unity, a unity that is perhaps more powerful given the realisation of Sheers that he is now to a certain extent fathering his father. This moment of father-son solidarity is encapsulated in the photo that captures the father and son 'together' on 'the edge of the world', giving the speaker a 'shallow handhold' (an appropriate climbing metaphor given the title and subject of the poem). Even though age might be creating a sense of separation between them, paradoxically the strength of their relationship and their shared sense of Welsh identity allows them to move closer together. This togetherness is of course augmented with the only example of full rhyme in the poem, with the 'view' of the Welsh landscape rhymed with the pronoun 'you' as the speaker addresses his father.

'The Wake' – Life Beyond Death

This moving elegy, commemorates the life of the poet's grandfather, a key figure in Sheers' poetry as seen in other poems such as 'The Equation' and earlier poems in Sheers' first volume of poetry, *The Blue Book*. His grandfather was a chest consultant and served in the Royal Navy, which explains the extended metaphor of the comparison of the grandfather's passing to a 'ship' that 'has sailed'. Here again are reminders of the body's inherent weakness, as the grandfather is passively 'folded' into his chair and is forced to 'watch himself die', which creates a division between his active, conscious mind and his increasingly fragile physical self. The 'frame' where the grandfather stands to bid farewell to his grandson acts symbolically as the threshold between life and death, marking the 'passing' of the grandfather. Yet what could be a rather grim reflection on human mortality is transformed into something quite different, as the 'wake' of the title comes to refer not only to a celebration of the dead but also the disturbed waters behind the moving ship, allowing the speaker to reflect on the impact of his grandfather's life, which 'disturbs the sea for miles either side'. The water directly behind this 'ship', however, is left 'strangely settled, turned, fresh/and somehow new'. This description accentuates the sense in which a life – even after its end – can positively enrich others, and stresses the interconnectedness of humanity. Death is not, Sheers argues, the end, but our lives continue to have meaning in the impact that we have made on those around us.

Dead and Living

The poems in *Skirrid Hill* present a speaker who is grappling with the complexity of living and the various divorces and separations that life brings, whether those separations are in love, as a result of geography, or age, and ultimately, life and death. What stands out in his poems about his family is an attempt to circumvent those inevitable divisions and find within them, or in spite of them, a greater sense of unity and connection. Sheers acknowledges the way in which the 'pattern' of his life is moulded by those who have come before him, and through this points towards a universal truth about life itself. As the father in 'The Hill Fort' tells his son, reminding him of his Welsh heritage, what matters is not the 'number of steps' we take in life but the 'depth of their impression'.

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