



'The thousand forms that move': Alice Oswald as a poet of Lent

Nathan Koblintz

'Reading Alice Oswald's poetry in the middle days of Lent feels like stopping in a place of spiritual lushness,' suggests Nathan Koblintz as he spends some time in the fertile landscape that emerges from the words of the award-winning poet. Traditional Lenten concerns of conversion, renewal, and watching and waiting all find new expression in her poems, which entice us to see and contemplate change.

One of Alice Oswald's poems is called 'For Many Hours there's been an Old Couple Standing at that Window' (*Woods etc.*, 23)¹. The couple are waiting together for sunrise, twitching with anticipation. But when the sun rises they are dead to all the beauty and uniqueness that unfolds around them. Maybe they are weary, or have seen it all before, or have not found the revelation they were hoping for.

After all, they have only their accustomed answers. They hardly know who they are



Her poetry invites us to anticipate and desire renewal; to recall what refreshment and healing feel like; to recognise how it has happened before in our lives and how it is happening again.

For all the beauty that it creates, there is not much room for sentimentality in gardening, nor in our spiritual lives. Oswald's poems are teeming with tiny things that are only perceived by the best observers: specks, seeds, thin sounds, nuances that are only

noticed by those who have been watching for years, angles and perspectives only achieved through contortions.

we are seeking
to be slightly more precise than is possible,
whizzing around, trying to un conceal things

(*'Five Fables of a Length of Flesh'*, *Woods etc.*, 32)

This couple remind me of what I've often thought to be the design flaw at the heart of Lent: an invitation for renewal, rejuvenation and freshness, that arrives at its preordained time, with its predictable patterns and answers. I know I'll put in a few weeks of spiritual effort, maybe sacrifice something; I know what sins I'll confess, what the priest will say. Here I go again, pushing my sin up the hill, taking up where I left off. There is nothing new under the sun.

This can be the experience of a desert: sameness everywhere you look, an unchanging, barren, place. But in the desert there are oases. Reading Alice Oswald's poetry in the middle days of Lent feels like stopping in a place of spiritual lushness. It's apt to talk of her work in this way: she is a gardener as well as a poet, and her poems offer the patterns of a garden, of change within repetition, of newness within sameness – the seeds that produce flowers that every year have never been seen before. The old couple who are unreceptive to the amazement around them are an anomaly in her poems.

At its best, Lent is a time for unconcealing things – stripping away the layers of distractions that have hidden the real. This only happens through careful looking, through attentiveness and attention to detail, to spotting patterns. This aim is very particular to poetry. As W.S. Graham has it:

the appearance of things
Must not be made to mean another
Thing. It is a kind of triumph
To see them and to put them down
As what they are.

(*'Approaches to How They Behave'*, *Selected Poems*)

To look in this way requires us to stay still and quiet, to have our gaze directed by God. But what is there to be seen once the seeing begins? Oswald's poems offer us a universe of textures and sizes, protuberances and gaps, fragrances and music. They stretch from the cosmos down to the spores of fungi and,

the thick reissuing starlike shapes
of cells and pores and water-rods

(*'Leaf, Woods etc., 8*)

and run their fingers along both petal and razor:

is my heart a rose? how unspeakable
is my heart a rose? how unspeakable
...this is my tense touch-sensitive heart
this is its mass made springy by the rain

(*'Walking past a Rose this June Morning', Woods etc., 20*)

why do you chop yourself away
piece by piece, to that final trace
of an outline of ice
on a cupful of space?

(*'Moon Hymn', Woods etc., 48*)

This multiplicity of the natural world acts like a dissolving agent on the limits we have put on what we see and notice. Its spiritual counterpart is a reacquaintance with wonderment and awe.

For all their bounty, Oswald's poems are often deserted, or when humans appear they are often distanced through myth or archetypes. Oswald rarely writes in confessional mode. It gives her poems a disconcerting coolness – the emotions and the experiences in her poems aren't always easy to identify with: it is less like reading Hugo Williams or Philip Larkin and more like reading [Emily Dickinson](#) or Rainer Maria Rilke. The warm hearth of 'human experience' has been replaced by a structure that is cosmic and mathematical. We are certainly not at the centre of the universe. This humility is another Lenten, desert, experience.

Shifting perspective like this reacquaints us with mystery and the discomfort of not-knowing. A poem in *The Thing...*, called 'Mountains' (34) is full of undefined 'somethings'. Something is different; something has gone; something is moving along the edge of a leaf; something changes. These silences – definitions with-

held – occur throughout her poems, side by side with that desire to be 'more precise than is possible'. Close looking and attentiveness only unfold more complexity, more layers, more things that are unknowable. The culmination of all those 'somethings' in 'Mountains' results in a conclusion that is not quite a conclusion:

and you can feel by instinct in the distance
the bigger mountains hidden by the mountains,
like intentions among suggestions.

Intentions hiding among suggestions: looking precisely in Lent involves all of our spiritual antennae being primed to receive messages in all forms and disguises – hints, intuition, instinct. These often aren't easy to articulate either to ourselves or to other people, and this kind of knowledge is generally less valued than the kind that can be structured and categorised. But Oswald's poems give us a sense of the revelations to which we are more open when we have a Lenten attentiveness to detail, an awareness of the variety of the world, an acceptance of our smallness and of mystery.

The experience of unceasing flux is one of those truths whose power has been diminished by the cliché we have formed around it: 'change is the only constant'. Good poetry shreds that dead chrysalis of language and gives the truth new words with which to clothe itself:

and whoops I found a mustard field
exploding into flowers;

and I slowly came to sense again
the thousand forms that move

(*'Woman in a Mustard Field', The Thing..., 16*)

If change is always going on, then it's always there to see. The caricature of a Damascene renewal is a 180-degree change in direction, precipitated by a blinding light, fanfare, easy-to-interpret divine instructions. I've approached Lent demanding such a renewal – it's about time that I get the holiness that I've been promised! We hope for change as though we are not actually changing right now, as if we have somehow stepped outside of this writhing, evolving garden.

This constant flux is not random, but patterned. The metaphor of the seasons is useful. Spring comes around yet again and the processes are always the same: soil, warmth, water, light. Oswald has written an astonish-

ing poem that tells the story of Tithonus, a character from Greek mythology whom Zeus made immortal following a request from the dawn, Tithonus's lover.² In the poem Tithonus is a decrepit old man, 'having recently turned five / thousand' who has seen so many dawns that he knows exactly what to expect – 'and then another thing and then another / and then another thing and then another' (FA, 45). In another poem, the narrator whilst weeding notices flowers

covering first one place
and then another
and after a while another place
and then another place
and another
and another

('Alongside Beans', FA, 26)

This is a risky thing to do in poetry – the language could so easily dry up. But in the context of her poems these repetitions become a life-giving thing, a home for all the flux and change. Repeated uniqueness – someone is always making all things new, time and time again. This shifts the way we should expect to see change – not always as a sudden reversal of direction, but returning to the same place where we were a month, a year ago, and noticing the variation, the shifts in tone and emphasis.

The repetition of the seasons, the days and the Church's year creates a pattern, and beneath the pattern, a meaning. The sheer variety of events in our lives can give the feeling of randomness; the bigger picture escapes us. But these cycles in the Church's year (the design flaw I thought I saw in Lent) remind us to search for the meaning even when it seems hidden:

you are so bodiless, so barely there
that I can only see you through starlings
whom you try this way and that like an
uncomfortable coat

('Sz', FA, 40)

This is a poem addressed to a breeze, imperceptible except through the molecules that it carries with it, and

the starlings whose flights are affected by its currents. This is a way of understanding something not by looking directly at it, but by seeing the consequences it causes, however tiny: seeing the workings of grace even when the hand is invisible.

There's something full of meaning happening all the time, and renewal and refreshment are always there. How are these meanings delivered to us? The ends of poems are usually a good place to look for them. There's something about the white space looming below the final line that heightens the anticipation and tempts the poet to step up to the pulpit – think of Auden's 'We must love one another or die' (a line that he later called trash, and swapped the 'or' for 'and'), or Larkin's 'What will survive of us is love'.³ But Oswald's revelations are revelations with the sound off. Something big is going on, for certain:

a sudden entering elsewhere.

('Sonnet', *Woods etc.*, 21)

– comprehension burst its container
twice

('Owl Village', *The Thing*, 30)

– and again, a 'something...inslides itself between moments / and spills the heart from its circumference' ('Mountains', *The Thing...*, 34). A revelation happens, but the content is hidden from us. A poem titled 'Gardeners at the Resurrection' is a good example – here are two gardeners complaining about the weather, hoicking heavy bags on their backs, all this everyday work going on whilst salvation is happening just behind them in real time. Another poet would yoke the divine and the ordinary together in a final couplet, allowing the light from one to shine on the dirt of the other. Oswald's poem delays and delays – clouds, birds, peat, cabbage, mud, and the end of the poem beckons with surely what must be a big final chord – but instead the gardeners

saw two men talking intently
and whistled softly and went on steadily.

('Gardeners at the Resurrection', *The Thing...*, 35)

The silence (enlivened by that soft whistle) invites us to provide the meaning. It's a space for our imagination to enter in and to complete the scene – the meaning isn't

presented to us a static or completed work, but requires our participation in it. Elsewhere the revelation comes after the change has already happened, but even then the poems don't make it explicit what has gone on. Instead the experience is simply that of realising that a change has taken place, without saying exactly what the change was:

Tell me
what have our souls been growing all these years
of time taken and rendered back as apples?

('The Apple Shed', *The Thing...*, 37)

This is the feeling that comes after a long period of inattentiveness, of realising that something has shifted – grace has been at work and the change it has made has finally caught our dull attention.

Oswald's poems brim with water – rain, rivers, seas, estuaries, pools – acting in all the ways that water does. One action of water that comes through repeatedly is that of water as a bringer of newness, washing away what has been there for a long time. Sometimes we can see a change clearly, in a different behaviour or a different reaction, but sometimes all we are able to articulate is that we have returned to the same place or circumstance but the way that we *see* something has changed – it is our vision that has freshened, or been renewed. The first poem in *Falling Awake*, 'A Short Story of Falling' is the story of rain falling onto seeds and leaves:

water which is so raw so earthy-strong
and lurks in cast-iron tanks and leaks along

drawn under gravity towards my tongue
to cool and fill the pipe-work of this song

(FA, 1)

Drawn by an invisible force, water fills, refreshes, rejuvenates.

Reading Alice Oswald's poems in Lent is an unusual experience. They offer an eroticism of change – what it feels like to anticipate change, to desire it, the tantalising way it has of being grasped and then ungraspable, unique but repetitive, that heady feeling of being out of your depth, of not being in control – of realising that grace has worked something in you. For all the fear and disappointment that change can bring,

it is worthwhile especially in Lent to be reminded of the sensual thrill of it.

I began this essay by quoting lines from the poem about the old couple who are living in what looks like a tedious, dried-up Lent. They are blind to the transformation going on around them. If they are a symbol then they are surely a warning of what happens when we stop exercising our attentiveness and receptiveness. But I only quoted half of that final verse. The full ending offers a promise: that regardless of how blind or dull or tired with our sin we feel, the grace that is happening within us has not stopped its work of renewal:

After all, they have only their accustomed answers.
They hardly know who they are, they feel like twists
of jointed grass, going on growing and growing.

('For Many Hours there's been an Old Couple
Standing at that Window', *Woods etc.*, 23)

Nathan Koblitz is a former member of the Thinking Faith Editorial Board.

¹ References to Alice Oswald's poems come from three of her books: *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (Oxford, 1996; republished London, 2007); *Woods etc.* (London, 2005); *Falling Awake* (London, 2016). Quotations for this essay have been limited to small extracts, and for the whole experience I recommend reading the full poems, and those in her other books: *Dart, A Sleepwalk on the Severn, Weeds and Wild Flowers, and Memorial*.

² The poem, from her latest book *Falling Awake*, takes 46 minutes to read if read properly (its subtitle is '46 minutes in the life of the dawn'). The words are accompanied by dots and dashes running vertically down the page and each short stanza is separated by at least an inch of white space (though the dots and dashes continue throughout). The dots and dashes act like a metronome to a piece of music. My first reaction was that this was a novelty, a slightly impressive visual trick; but on reading there is a definite pull and counterpull between wanting to read quickly on, and the drag created by the metronome. It not only forces a slower, more attentive reading, but it mirrors the experience of Tithonus too – impatient to see the dawn, but unable to make it arrive any faster.

³ W.H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939', *Another Time* (1940). Philip Larkin, 'An Arundel Tomb', *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964)