

## **'A SCATTER OF LITTLE SIGHTS AND HAPPENINGS'**

### **The Poetic Vision of Ruth Bidgood**

*Bonnie Thurston*

WALES IS A LAND OF SINGERS AND POETS. One thinks immediately of the 'Thomases'—Dylan, R.S., Edward—or of the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. One thinks also of Ruth Bidgood, whose *New and Selected Poems* has recently been published by the Welsh literary press, Seren Books. In my view she stands in the ancient, mysterious bardic tradition of Wales. She has 'said that she wants to be "a remembrancer, a voice for mid-Wales"', and indeed she is.<sup>1</sup> But she is not really a Welsh nationalist in the way that R. S. Thomas is. Her poems accomplish the task of celebrating Wales because they arise from a simple love of place, not from a conflictual relationship to it. There is something numinous (dare I say 'holy?') in her English-language poems inspired by Wales. And that 'something' is more universal than any particular geographic location.

Ruth Bidgood was born in a mining village near Neath, Glamorgan. Her father was the Church in Wales vicar in Port Talbot, where she attended school before reading English at Oxford. During the Second World War she was a coder with the Women's Royal Naval Service in Egypt. For many years she lived in Surrey, working for *Chambers Encyclopedia* in London, before she returned in the 1960s to Wales to take up her work as a poet and a distinguished local historian. She has written many articles on the history of Breconshire and Radnorshire, and has won several prestigious poetry awards.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Merryn Williams, 'The Poetry of Ruth Bidgood', *Poetry Wales*, 28/3 (1993), 36-41, here 38. I am most grateful to Cheryl Ryan Harshman, Head Librarian at West Liberty State College, West Virginia, for securing this article for me.

## *Supplication*

*On the altar-stone  
bread of pain,  
bitter cup.*

*I lift my hands  
to the Threefold,  
call down  
the change, the joy.  
The small cold mass-  
house  
trembles with power.*

*Into this dark  
I pray we go down  
as into a holy well,  
as into black waters  
of healing.*

*In this ending  
I pray we know  
newness.*

*After this rending  
I pray we find  
wholeness.*

*Through this fire  
I pray we leap  
into peace.*

Literary critics classify poets with labels like ‘nature poet’, ‘religious poet’, ‘woman poet’. Ruth Bidgood dislikes the last label, and, although she does write about both nature and religion, her work is too complex and subtle to fit into either of the other categories. The word I would use is ‘delicate’. This might seem odd when considering the landscape, history and people of Wales. But Ruth Bidgood’s poetry exhibits a tenuous delicacy, like a spider’s web which can hold a weight far greater than its own.

To introduce Ruth Bidgood, a more helpful approach than applying labels is to highlight some themes that appear in *New and Selected Poems*. This approach has its own difficulties, because the work is so coherent. To pull at any given thematic thread threatens to mar the whole, to spoil the pattern, to unravel the tapestry. Nevertheless, I will risk naming three themes in her work that I find especially intriguing: the theme of memory (especially what the child recalls in adulthood); the theme of reality and illusion; and the theme of hiddenness and mystery.

## **Memory**

It is not surprising that a historian would be interested in the phenomenon of memory, and would observe, ‘The future has been and has been’ (‘The Fluent Moment’).<sup>2</sup> Although she says that she has ‘no arts of conjuration, / and wouldn’t want to raise ...

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Bidgood, *New and Selected Poems* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2004), 161. Hereafter page references to this volume are given in parentheses. The poem in the panel forms the sixth in a sequence entitled ‘Into the Dark’, and can be found on p. 186.

ghosts' (7. G.F.L.R., 266), Bidgood often writes about the past, and of how what once used to be changes when it is recalled. The poem 'Chimneys' (14) describes the illusion of seeing 'chimneys in the trees / Across the valley, on a little hill ...':

And afterwards, alone, I searched on maps  
To make the house more mine by knowing its name—  
And found there is no farm on the hill,

No house of any kind, not even a ruin.  
What trick of sun and shade put chimneys there  
For us to find and talk about?

And is the evening more real that the house?  
Now both are gone, it seems a fine distinction  
That one was and the other was not.

Remembering, I build the evening again,  
The plunging valley and the little hill,  
And look! there are chimneys in the trees.

Like the speaker in the poem, we build the past again in our remembering, but perhaps the past we build is not the past that was.

Many of Bidgood's poems seem to have arisen from a visit to an abandoned house or a church, or from some aspect of Welsh lore. The abandoned house recalled in 'Cefn Cendu' teaches us that 'The path that leads to vision leads also away' (25). The old church at 'Llanfihangel Abergwesyn' was made of 'soft stone' that 'sopped up the endless rain' (146). Bits of Welsh history and mythology also inspire poems. 'Safaddan' (88), for example, tells the mysterious tale of a city submerged in a Breconshire lake; and the long, eerie sequence 'Valley-before-Night' reflects all three sources of poetic inspiration: house, church, Welsh lore.

For Ruth Bidgood, memory is something with which we must come to terms:

There are days when waves of unremembered life  
tumble in, one upon another, almost  
irresistibly. ...



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*Ruth Bidgood*

... Best  
 have your boat ready, furbish your skills  
 in navigation, submit to being lifted  
 higher than you could have imagined,  
 ride the flood, voyage to countries  
 you had given up hope of revisiting.  
 ('2. Riding the Flood', 251)

Such flights (or attacks?) of memory are important:

What is forgotten cannot be healed.  
 It hides quiet through the bountiful days;

in time of decay cries again,  
an unphysicked, irremediable pain.  
(‘Unhealed’, 254)

Not all the memory poems are sombre. ‘Girls Laughing’ recalls the wonderful, hysterical laughter of youth:

I can remember laughing like that.  
Two girls, folding a sheet  
down there in the sun,  
stagger with laughter, willingly lose  
to a snatching breeze, to breathlessness,  
to bulging unstable exuberance  
stretched between them.  
Sheet-corners escape, flap snapping.  
Tugged off-balance by swell and jerk  
of uncontrollable life,  
two girls, weeping, laugh and laugh. (96)

‘Pig’ describes how a rainy evening in a holiday house leads to otherwise inexplicable associations:

One pouring evening on holiday  
the heaters failed; we bundled  
the children in blankets.  
The landlord arrived, bearing no fuel,  
but in the mood for a chat. For an hour  
he told us stories of pigs, their charm,  
their niceness, their more than human  
intelligence, the balance they keep  
between reason and rich intuition.  
...  
Years later, rain and a cold room sometimes  
remind me of hairy camphorous blankets,  
long-bodied metallic bristliness of pig. (235)

A number of Bidgood’s memory poems involve an adult looking back on an event from childhood. ‘Away from Home’ depicts the child’s instinctive understanding of ‘differentness’:

The Irish doctor and his wife  
lived their expatriate role  
to the last quirk and syllable.  
Seven years old, I could see

but not define their strangeness.  
 Not knowing brandy, I had no name  
 for that dominant note in the close  
 heavy-perfumed room.

...

I think that even then I sensed  
 the doctor and his wife were away from home  
 for ever (since home, if they returned,  
 would not be what they wanted), and that they  
 knew this, and could not be healed. (165)

The adult eye sees things that the child could not have known, and the reader learns how the childhood event shaped the adult's perception. The adult may, as the poem 'Journeys' asserts, 'have forgotten stations we stopped at, / how old I was, how long the journey'. Nevertheless, he or she can recall 'the meadow blue with harebells', and is thus led to ask, 'From what stop / on what journey comes the memory ... ?' (100) Memory,

... sees what the children did not,  
 ambivalence and taint; but keeps  
 all we then had, within one white image.  
 ('Emblems 2. Morfa', 180)

### ***Reality and Illusion***

The theme of memory leads naturally to the question of reality and illusion. What was 'real' about what happened? What illusory? Again, the historian's analytical gifts are evident in poems on this subject, but the analysis does not diminish the mystery. 'Supper' (63) asks the reader to consider whether diners or their reflection in a window are the 'reality':

Each time the black window drew our eyes  
 we saw a known room strange  
 and unstable with storm, saw too  
 those threatened selves who had let such darkness in.

In the poem 'Dog on the Hill' (184) we are told of a particular hill 'where a house once stood'. For the speaker, there was 'nothing more to disturb me / than lack of breath'; but her dog was frightened. The dog knew of something that the human being could not see. Who was perceiving correctly? What was the reality and what the illusion? I have already noted that the poem 'Chimneys' turns on whether



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*Llanfrynach Aqueduct*

chimneys or trees were seen in the distance. Part of the acuteness of the poet's vision challenges the reader to consider that the appearance she so precisely renders may not be the reality.

Often Bidgood's poems leave me with what she calls in 'Not the Pathetic Fallacy' a 'fertile uncertainty' (182). They remind me that much of what I perceive is a matter of focus; I see what I look for:

Distanced but only half-ignored,  
beyond the dear trivialities  
the real subject looms, its shapes  
huge, enigmatic, inescapable.

(*'Focussing'*, 36)

Many of Bidgood's poems ask us to see beyond the immediate or through the material to the 'real' subject. They evince an exquisite ambiguity which suggests the importance of this kind of 'seeing through' without telling us either how to do it or what to see. They put me in mind of the confession I make regularly but to which I seldom attend, that God has created 'all things seen *and* unseen' (*italics mine*).

God's creation includes unseen things and realities, and Bidgood's poems describe both.

### ***Hiddenness and Mystery***

So we come to the third theme I want to highlight: hiddenness and mystery. These poems remind me that there are indeed more things in heaven and earth than philosophy allows. The long sequence 'Valley-Before-Night' (149-158) exemplifies this theme. 'Messenger' reflects a hidden connection between the human and non-human as the speaker muses about how to tell a hive of bees that a nameless old man has died, so that they will not swarm and leave:

Is there a formula for telling bees  
of a stranger's death? They are remote  
in the wild upper garden, yet however aloof  
and preoccupied, they require to know  
of crisis and celebration.

...

Perhaps they will not expect ceremony  
from one who is no concern of theirs.  
Perhaps it is permissible to approach,  
making as little stir as possible,  
through the huge hemlock and old black-currant bushes,  
and stooping at each white-slatted house  
say only, 'Bees, an old man has died—  
I do not know his name'. (64)

'Standing Stone' (78) reminds the reader of 'the ancient orientation' and that,

A mindless ritual is not empty.  
When the dark mind fails, faith lives  
in the supplication of hands  
on prayer-wheel, rosary, stone.

'Lighting Candles' (90) brings together the themes of memory and mystery, and illustrates Ruth Bidgood's belief that poetry is 'a positive force which can ward off the darkness'.<sup>3</sup> While lighting candles in her

<sup>3</sup> Meic Stephens, available on the website 'Welsh Writers Online', <http://www.swan.ac.uk/english/crew/welshwriters/bidgood.htm>.





own home, the poet remembers a picture of Indian women floating their prayers down river on candle-laden leaf boats:

Tonight I light candles.  
What prayers were waiting  
for these new bodies of fire?  
Standing outside, I see  
upon a dark and turbulent sky  
my house launched, with a freight of light. (90)

There is certainly something religious about poems which communicate,

... an idea of completeness, an intuition  
of light, perhaps a welcome  
for the little souls of things  
flying free to meet us.  
(‘Breaking Bowls’, 131)

### ***To See as Others See***

Each of the themes I have highlighted appears in poems with enormous attentiveness to the details of the world, natural and human. In this,

they are similar to the work of the contemporary US poet Mary Oliver, who also uses external things to speak of internal realities. Bidgood's poems bespeak the sometimes infinitesimally slow, but inevitable, influence of landscape, house and human upon each other.

It seems that stone and wood have their own  
knowledge ....  
(‘Guerinou 4. New Houses’, 261)

Ruth Bidgood's is an important vision, a delicate, quiet corrective to the brashness of contemporary discourse. To those I have interested in her work, I make this general suggestion: attend to the ‘I’ of the poem. It may be the poet, or someone very different, as in the ‘found poems’ which speak in the voice of persons apparently uncovered in the course of historical research. Examples of this type include ‘Letter’ (49), ‘Seven Found Poems’ (56), and my favourite, ‘Edward Bache advises his Sister’.

Dear Sister,  
Although I have no reason  
to suspect you of misconduct,  
yet my affection and solicitude  
will, I hope, excuse these lines  
of brotherly advice.  
...  
Young, inexperienced, unsuspecting,  
fond of flattery (as what woman is not),  
she too often falls a victim to those worst of men  
who, with the aid of oaths, protestations,  
and promise of marriage,  
seduce her from the paths of virtue .... (110)

In our self-obsessed age, the ability to assume the identity of another, to see life through someone else's eyes and know it by another's heart, is a rare gift, one well honed in these poems which take seriously St Paul's injunction, ‘Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others’ (Philippians 2:4, RSV).

This amazing ability to see as the other sees is related to what I take to be another gift of Ruth Bidgood's: the gift of reticence. In a ‘tell all’ world, she often writes of the shadow of things, ‘a far silence / within storm, a shadow hardly seen’ (‘from: Llŷn’, 213):

... Over the clearing,  
 dim at the forest edge, was a shape, shadow,  
 a thing poised, a presence that distantly  
 skittered and snuffed.  
 ('Deer in Wyre Forest', 171)

Often, it is just this shadowy and reticent quality that gives her poems their strength. She *almost* tells me things I want to know, but does not quite make them explicit. I sometimes respond to her poems as I respond to some of the parables of Jesus; I want to shout 'tell me, tell me'. Both give me all the clues, but leave me to piece the meaning together. While in their evocation of mystery the poems are religious, they are never preachy; Ruth Bidgood is never prescriptive. She writes in 'Yard in Winter' (268):

What is it these distances below,  
 hills climbing behind, confer on a scatter  
 of little sights and happenings?  
 Not exactly meaning. What comes  
 is willingness not to ask for that—  
 a sort of gratitude: a sort of love.

Technically, Bidgood's poems are resolutely unquirky. Not for her gimmicks or ephemeral fashionableness or gratuitous innovation. These poems rejoice in the sturdiness of the English language. They are enlivened by dependence on carefully chosen verbs, exactly described nouns, and the occasional pleasure of an archaic word used with precision. They remind us that 'real life' is everywhere, that the myth of innocent and pure nature is myth; '... this poetry reminds us that nature can be merciless'.<sup>4</sup> The voice of these poems is settled, not searching, but their vision is no less searing for that. In spite of the fact that the poet faces harsh realities head on, the overall effect of her work is restful. Some lines from one of her earliest collections express an attitude which pervades her work.

No need to ask where other  
                   roads might have led,  
 Since they led elsewhere;  
 For nowhere but this here and now

<sup>4</sup>Williams, 'The Poetry of Ruth Bidgood', 37.

Is my true destination.  
 The river is gentle in the soft evening,  
 And all the steps of my life have  
     brought me home.  
     ('Roads', 17)

Why does Ruth Bidgood's *New and Selected Poems* matter in times like these? The poems show that it is still possible to look gently at the ordinary mysteries of the past and present, still possible to remove one's intellectual shoes before their holiness, and still possible, as my grandmother would have said, to 'let them be'. In an intellectual and artistic climate prone to poke, prod and pronounce, this is a prodigious achievement.

**Bonnie Thurston** currently lives as a solitary, having resigned the William F. Orr Professorship in New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 2002. She has written ten theological books, over a hundred articles, and two volumes of poetry. Her Church affiliations include the Episcopal Church and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She was ordained in 1984, and is a spiritual director and retreat speaker.



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