Lived Coherence : **The Poetry of Tessa Ransford**

In an early collection of poems, *While It Is Yet Day* (Quarto Press, 1977), Tessa Ransford set out 'Ten Commandments for Survival', her manifesto for living,

> We will love the world
> in its variety and abundance,
> and will work for the future with out utmost powers
> and we will work also for the community of the world.

This is not, for her, an abstract ideal. It is the central tenet of her life and poetry, the two being intertwined not simply in the sense that her poetry reflects her life, but much more exceptionally, that her life exemplifies her passionate commitment to poetry, her 'craft / to sail through the world' (*Indian Selection,* Akros Publications, 2000). Few have done more to promote poetry in Scotland. Founder of the Scottish Poetry Library, founder of the Poetry School, editor of Lines Review, recent president of Scottish PEN: it is an impressive roll call by any standard. But this tireless work to bring poetry and poets to the attention of the general public as a genuine force for good is rooted in the sensibility and creative energy which produced her seven main collections, her several pamphlets, her translations. This is the 'lived coherence' she speaks of in *Seven Valleys* (Ramsay Head Press, 1991). She is constantly striving 'to try to live the life her poetry demands and write the poetry our situation in the world demands' (*Fools and Angels*, Ramsay Head Press, 1984).

This strong need to make life and poetry into a whole, for a seamless existence, may have its roots in her early experience of dislocation. Tessa was born in India: 'To have first found the world / in abundant India / is my life's greatest privilege' ('With gratitude to India', *Light of the Mind*, Ramsay Head Press, 1980). She moved to England with her parents at the age of six and to Scotland four years later. As an adult she returned to India, living for several years there before returning to Scotland. In her 'Interview with Myself' (*In Scotland*, no.4, Summer 2001), she identifies 'the juxtaposition of these cultures [India and Scotland]' as a formative experience and speaks of 'the India bit tugging away at the edges (or at the centre?).'

To this reader, at least, the Indian experience is a central thread running through all her work, not only in the strain of Eastern mysticism - Buddhism, Sufism - which it reflects in tandem with the Western mysticism of Bonhoeffer and Teilhard de Chardin, but more subtly in her recurring preoccupation with the theme of the exile and the stranger. Here again, life and poetry reflect each other. It is surely no coincidence that much of Tessa's recent work for Scottish PEN has been concerned with giving a voice to the exiled writers living among us. As she says in her poem 'To My Son Going Abroad' (*Indian Selection*),

Abroad is the place to be in this world.
It is where we were born
and is always where we are heading.

A theme which surfaces in this poem is recognition by the stranger,

You will meet subtle webs of thinking:
people who gather your thoughts
before you start to explain

and this recurs in her poems. Often, as in 'Love II' from the Search section of *Seven Valleys*, it is the stranger who sees us more clearly than those we think closest to us,

How do strangers recognise us?
They are able to see us without
our protection in the familiar.
They touch directly the shining essence.

Such a moment of recognition occurs in 'The Willows and the Vines' *(Medusa Dozen,* Ramsay Head Press, 1994), where 'a wise old woman' on the verge of death 'speaks to the truth of a stranger' and divines in the poet a quality hidden from others. Tessa herself has given this recognition to strangers in her translation work of every kind, from her sympathetic rendering of Iyad Hayatleh's poignant poem 'Quest and Question' (published in the Scottish PEN booklet *Between*, 2006) to her carefully individuated translations of five German poets (*The Nightingale Question*, Shearsman Books, 2004). Particularly impressive are her translations of Uta Mauersberger and Elmar Schenkel, poets with highly distinctive voices, which Tessa allows to be heard even in English, the act of translation being itself an act of recognition, of touching 'the shining essence.'

Strangers may recognise the 'true' self, but, as Tessa says in her 'Interview with Myself', 'we are creatures of many selves, some of them at odds with each other.' Many of her most powerful poems explore the tensions between these different selves, particularly between the woman's sense of herself, and the self imposed by the expectations of others, which can lead to self-denial in the pejorative sense, denial of the self, as strikingly expressed in 'Going Nowhere' (*Indian Selection*),

And I see those who give
up on promised lands
turn back because they have
the present on their hands

this 'present' being all too often the demands of family and children and the household. Or, like her 'Indian Women at Windermere' (*Fools and Angels*), women may huddle into the 'coats and spectacles' of an alien culture, forfeiting their own bright individuality. Always, set against the urge to conform, is a quiet defiance - defiance of 'the raw, white civilisers' ('The Alumbrados', *When It Works it feels like play*, Ramsay Head Press, 1998), of 'men and their principles / like leaden bars across my stained glass' ('Meditation After Separation', *A Dancing Innocence*, Macdonald Publishers, 1988).

It is perhaps in *Medusa Dozen* that this defiance finds its fullest expression. Medusa is re-imagined as a woman in the fullest sense, 'petrifying' men with her intellect, but also with her physical presence, one who will not accept the simple definitions which refuse to see her as she is in all her complexity. In this defiant insistence on her reality there is at the same time a demonstration of 'lived coherence': allowed to be fully herself, the woman can accommodate the conflicting demands of her nature and, as vividly dramatised in 'Set Loose', based on a lived experience from her days in India,

> take up
> the coiled serpent with its crushed head
> and set it loose to ripple through the fields.

Though alert through all her collections to the ways in which women are imprisoned in predominantly male expectations of them, Tessa would not, I think, describe herself as a feminist, still less a 'women's', poet. Indeed, she states in 'Interview with Myself', 'I am a woman and I am a poet. I don't see the need to put them together. I am a woman whatever I do or think but what matters is not that I'm a woman but what I do and think. My poetry is integral to that doing and thinking.'

The 'doing and thinking' throughout her work has, from the beginning, been engaged with the 'community of the world' which she speaks of in her 'Ten Commandments for Survival' and with the 'variety and abundance' of that world. She shows an equal sympathy for suffering humanity and for the suffering which humanity inflicts on the environment. Her most recent pamphlet, *Shades of Green* (Akros Publications, 2005), which was shortlisted for the Eco Prize for Creativity 2006, is as central to her concerns as *Medusa Dozen*, and no less passionately engaged with its theme.

What makes *Shades of Green* such an attractive collection - one of her best, in my view - is its lightness of touch, its sure grasp of the potentialities of poetic form and language to draw the reader in. The world is revealed anew through the eyes of the poet, who notes simultaneously, and without comment, the 'pods and strings of seaweed', the 'scuttle of running bird-life' and the 'plastic bottles, old

shoes/ dead gulls' in her 'Early Morning Walk Along The Sands Of East Lothian'; who gives the birds in 'The Seabirds' Protest' a voice humorously parodic of the voice of human assemblies ("Silence," cried the albatrosses, "Order, order!") but sees them in the end littering 'the parliamentary precincts' with 'delicate feathered souls and desperate beaks' - a heartbreaking image.

But though *Shades of Green* is her most direct articulation of ecological concerns, her many tender and responsive poems on the Scottish landscape implicitly voice the same concerns, which began to take shape when she was working for the Netherbow Centre under the directorship of Gordon Strachan. Take 'Driving Through Tweeddale' (*Scottish Selection*, Akros Publications, 2001). Here the carefully observed plants and animals, the 'foal [spread] out asleep', the 'bluebell-patches' belong to the landscape in a way in which the observer, driving through, cannot: 'To drive through country is not to belong ... is a kind of treachery.' Her kingfisher, in the poem of that title (*Natural Selection*, Akros Publications 2001), becomes a messenger 'out of the blue', from living nature to the trembling, earthbound observer, almost a spirit of air,

> bluer than sky
> skyer than air
> more air than water
> more water than leaf

The young transplanted trees in 'March 15th' (*Shadows From the Greater Hill*, Ramsay Head Press, 1987) are seen as sentient beings, adjured to 'explore the dignity you dwell in', one of many poems in which trees reflect and contrast with human experience, even sacrifice themselves for humanity, like the 'Roundabout Tree' (*When It Works it feels like play*).

Tessa's is very much a considered poetry, a poetry of ideas and of principle. As she says herself in the series *Conversations with Scottish Writers* (*Conversations with Scottish Writers No.3*, Fras Publications, 2007) 'I did my thinking through poetry.' Her principles have remained remarkably steady since that early manifesto in *While It Is Yet Day*, through all the changes and vicissitudes of her life and the different demands of its various stages. But this seriousness of purpose, the backbone of her work, while it allows plenty of room for playfulness, does sometimes, to my mind, work against her undoubted poetic gifts when it becomes too sententious or too expository. She is by no means the only poet of whom this could be said - Wordsworth is an example who springs to mind.

There are, for modern readers at least, difficulties with poetry of ideas/political concerns. Poetry is not a philosophical tract nor a treatise nor a political pamphlet. One of Tessa's own poems ('The Unquiet Poem', *When It Works it feels like play*) makes this very point,

> The unquiet poem does not
> agree or disagree. It cannot
> utter because it thinks
> in different words

which is echoed in 'What Use Are Poets?' (*Fools and Angels*): 'Repairs are not his [the poet's] task, but making / Worlds out of words'. Compare this with 'Poem - you are composed to agitate' from 'Poem With A Purpose' in *Light of the Mind*, a collection which was produced at the request of the Netherbow Centre with the specific aim of expressing the Centre's core values. The poem, as its title proclaims, fits with that purpose, but I think it exemplifies the problem with poetry that, in Keats' words, 'has a palpable design upon us'. There are far fewer instances of such poetry in her later work, where, as in *Shades of Green*, she takes an altogether different approach to tackling political poetry.

A turning point in her development is marked by the collection *A Dancing Innocence*. From then on, as the title of the collection implies, her poems, it seems to me, acquire a new freedom of movement, a new confidence. It is in this collection that the poet tells her children, 'each of you is worth / a hundred possible poems' ('Prayer For My Children'). This points to the source of greatest energy in her work: her poems, like Wordsworth's, most potently express her central concerns when they focus on a living being, a lived experience, as in the beautifully modulated poem 'Honey' (*When It Works it feels like play*) about her mother's old age, or the directness of her poem 'By Night', from the same collection, about visiting her husband in hospital, 'Night after night I drove / A hundred miles or more of twisting track'.

To characterize Tessa's poetic gifts independent of her subject matter - which is a kind of betrayal of her own synthesising approach - I would point to her emotional honesty, her lyric gift, her precise observation, her careful, sometimes surprising, turn of phrase - 'To catch a living star must be a fearful thing', 'a pair of dippers play dive and seek', 'Trees are exceptional people'. Her poems are notable too for their technical range, which, like other aspects of her talents, seems to me rooted in her approach to the challenge of living. She notes in 'Interview with Myself' how some self-proclaimed feminists have criticized her for adopting 'male' verse-forms, rather than seeking to break away completely from what they see as a male-dominated poetic tradition. A more generous view is that her never less than competent and sometimes inspired use of a wealth of poetic forms reflects her breadth of sympathy and the wide range of her interests. It is also a key element in her artistry: 'I love the life that a form can bring to a poem. The forms arise from the human body in its breathing, dancing, singing aliveness' (*Noteworthy Selection*, Akros Publications 2002).

To cover a life's work is to become the companion through the years of another mind, trace its development and its doubling back, its doubts and its certainties, conscious all the while that a poem, if it lives, will live with its own life. Tessa's finest poems do indeed live with their own life. What is striking about her development as a poet is not only the unity of her work - the 'unusual purity of vision' early identified by Alan Bold - but its continuing openness to the influences of the world around her. She is still developing, still searching for 'new migrations / exquisite far imaginings' ('Moving Home', *A Dancing Innocence*). In the Fras *Conversations*, Tessa Ransford calls herself 'a practising poet'. Poetry is her 'practice in the community of the human'. She defines her life as 'a continuing attempt to discover and understand.' 'A Poem About A Concrete Poem' (*While It Is Yet Day*), which she wrote long before the Scottish Poetry Library came into being, seems to embody her vision for the library, but it could serve also as a vision of her future as a poet. Poems are for her stages on a journey of discovery which is never complete,

> But the concrete of this poem
> will never be quite set;
> it will be for ever forming
> that which isn't perfect yet.

A C Clarke