Introduction

I was asked by *Writeability Scotland* in summer 2001 to submit three new poems with accompanying 'postscript' describing the ideas in each poem, its language and form. I found this a worthwhile exercise and decided that I might look back on particular poems I have published through the years with a view to re-issuing them with 'notes'.

I have chosen each poem in this pamphlet from those previously published in books or magazines, beginning with my earliest pamphlet, *Poetry of Persons* (1976) and ending with *When it works it feels like play,* published in 1998. Sometimes it is difficult to remember the particular nexus of ideas and feelings that generated a poem some twenty or thirty years ago. Nevertheless it is worth a try, and probably I am the person most likely to have some clue as to what my own poems are about. I'm always ready to receive help from others in this matter, however, as I did from Erin Beckala, a student at La Crosse campus, University of Wisconsin, who helped me to understand my poem 'Driving Through Tweeddale'. I see this pamphlet as opening up a dialogue.

THE FOOL

When everyone is in his place,
when every move premeditated,
the Fool will step into a space

where he was not anticipated,
where his subtle entry makes
one and all interrelated.

The world shudders, opens, shakes,
its universal patterns range;
its brooding spirit wings and wakes . . .

The laws of balance and exchange,
the perfect and yet incomplete,
the ancient which is new and strange,

both compensation and defeat,
both conquest and assimilation,
the point where opposites can meet . . .

are offered as an invitation
by the Fool, who seems to smile
both at our haste and hesitation.

He stays quite motionless, while
all else functions as it should;
dead-in-the-centre, odd, futile,

no use for anything, no good;
symbolises contradiction,

that which can't be understood,

incongruity, restriction,
disparity and ridicule;
fact that out-imagines fiction,

exception made to prove the rule.
Who can close his eyes to see
the lightning movements of the Fool?

Accepting helplessness, yet free;
call him names, he's undefined,
elusive as identity,

ingenious as the human mind.
His laughter lifting from despair,
welling up within mankind

as if in truth he's always there;
to level us perhaps, and save us
from ourselves – if we could dare –

The Fool, the God, the one who gave us
himself, expressed in one man's face,
the sense of his humour, and called it grace.

Poetry of Persons (Quarto Press, 1976)

THE FOOL

1. BACKGROUND

My dearly-loved late sister-in-law, Jean Scatter, used to feed me with novels, when my children were small, knowing my tendency to intellectual starvation. It started when she sent them to me while we were in Pakistan, but she continued to toss interesting books my way all her life. One of these was *The Greater Trumps* by Charles Williams. I read it avidly and subsequently devoured all eleven novels by Charles Williams as well as his extraordinary book *The Descent of the Dove: a History of the Holy Spirit in the Church,* given me by Dr Gordon Strachan.

At the age of fifteen, when being prepared for Confirmation in the Episcopal Church, I questioned why Jesus found it necessary to confer the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when it/he was clearly active throughout the Old Testament. I never got a satisfactory answer, but have discovered for myself some of the answers in the course of a life of educating and re-educating myself.

Unfortunately I no longer have a copy of *The Greater Trumps.* I tend to pass on to others what I have gratefully received, this seeming to me a blessed way in which to repay kindness, far better than trying to repay the giver, who has already been rewarded in the giving.

The Greater Trumps is a novel based on the Tarot cards. Reading the book was my first introduction to the Tarot. The hero of the novel is the Fool (or the Joker), the spare in the conventional pack. In the book the Fool can go anywhere and say and do things unnoticed and in so doing change the parameters of a situation. He (sic) makes the impossible possible through his presence causing a subtle reshuffling or recombination of the elements.

He appears useless, irrelevant, immobile even (at the still point of the turning world) just because he moves so fast and cannot be neatly labelled or slotted into any pigeon-hole. I was excited by this concept. At the time I saw the Fool as God's Fool and understood the role as one to follow on the spiritual path. Charles Williams himself would have intended this interpretation. Later I saw it to be, for me anyway, the archetype for the poet in society. (Charles Williams' novel *The Place of the Lion* is about the power of the archetype.)

2. FORM

I wanted to convey the ever-changing, inconceivably swift, continual movement and interaction of the Fool. To do this I used terza rima for the poem. Terza rima is a form where the rhyme-scheme forms a weaving chain and so helps to give an impression of simultaneity, something which is hard to convey in words that follow one another sequentially, whether spoken aloud or read silently. Each stanza has three lines ABA, but the middle rhyme of the first stanza become the first and third of the next: BCB, and so on until it is rounded off perhaps with two rhyming lines. It is important to choose words that are not too difficult to find rhymes for, since there will be two more rhymes for each. The poem itself must flow and coil in a sinuous fashion without being held up by awkward rhymes.

3. LANGUAGE

In those days we were not politicised regarding the use of 'he' and 'his'. It covered male and female. Certainly my mind's eye picture of the Fool was not gendered. The Fool has to be beyond categorisation. The vocabulary is actually quite heavy, full of abstract words, the sort of words that are advised against in poetry. Words dealing with our paradigms and institutions and block-headed thought systems. The Fool is a pattern-maker who moves through and gently breaks up blocks. I now use the terms 'pattern-headed' and 'blockheaded' to distinguish these modes of thinking.

4. CONTENT

The poem opens, in verses 1–6, by describing how the Fool steps into our set pieces and disturbs them by offering us connections, by allowing incompleteness, asymmetry and contradiction. In verses 7–11 the seeming uselessness, immobility and futility of the Fool is described. Normal vision and views cannot countenance him (cannot see him or ignore him as good-for-nothing nonsense). Verses 11–14 describe what his presence can do for us. It can allow us to accept ourselves, accept the muddle and mess life inevitably involves us in, and finally identifies him as God-with-us:

The Fool, the God, the one who gave us
himself; expressed in one man's face,
the sense of his humour, and called it grace.

5. OUTCOME

The Fool did work for me. I submitted it to the Jubilee poetry competition of the Scottish Association for the Speaking of Verse in 1974 and it was awarded first prize by the judge, Alexander Scott, who praised it highly at the award ceremony. I read it out to much acclaim and was thereupon offered publication by Norman Wilson of the Ramsay Head Press. The Fool was included in the anthology, *Voice and Verse,* that the SASV brought out to celebrate its jubilee year. The poem was not included in my first publication with the Ramsay Head, *Light of the Mind* in 1980, nor in any subsequent books of mine, not even in *Fools and Angels, 1984.*

A POEM ABOUT A CONCRETE POEM

I shall make a concrete poem
a place by art designed
where the stones and sand of life
a mould may find

I shall open it by day
to the sunshine, and by night
when it will be a lighted place
where people will find light

I shall fill the place with books
with books of poetry
wherein the very self of things
speaks its reality

And through links and lines between them
seep like irrigation
waters from the deep earth
the flow of imagination

It will fertilise the thinking
and nourish into being
this intention for a concrete
poem that I am seeing

The words of the poem
are people coming in and out
who in their intermixing
will make a work of art

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

A fusion of diversity
within a new creation;
a many-sided goddess
in one ecstatic person

It is ecstasy of grace
yet concrete as I say
making personal the matters
that happen everyday

The poem making concrete
the energies of grace
which generates the personal

through shapes of sacrifice

I shall make a concrete poem
a place by art designed
where the poetry of persons
is created in kind

While It Is Yet Day (Quarto Press, 1977)

A POEM ABOUT A CONCRETE POEM

1. BACKGROUND

I have chosen this poem because of the story behind it.

In 1972–73 I attended an evening class in contemporary Scottish literature given by Bob Tait of *Scottish International.* One evening, on coming home, I had a vision of a place where ordinary people, men and women, could gather and meet during the daytime or the evening, to find, discuss and share poetry, without embarrassment or the 'cover' of pub or university. I wrote straight off, without revision, 'A Poem about a Concrete Poem'.

At that time I hadn't published any books or even poems in magazines. I was 'just a housewife' with a toddler and three older children. In 1974 the Netherbow opened under the direction of Rev. Dr Gordon Strachan, who invited me to a think-tank session about how it should be run and what sort of place it should be. I read out the Concrete Poem. Gordon immediately adopted it as expressing the Netherbow's aspirations and had a lovely calligraphic poster made of it. I also read it on an STY programme about the Netherbow, when I was so nervous I asked for a dram first, which slightly disconcerted the producer of religious programmes.

It wasn't until 1981–82 that I first started campaigning for a Scottish Poetry Library, which eventually opened in a very humble way in Tweeddale Court in 1984. Donald Smith, then Director of the Netherbow, gave me the remaining copies of the Concrete Poem poster to sell in the SPL (which they very seldom did). Fifteen years later the new building for the SPL opened in June 1999. The architect, Malcolm Fraser, loved the Concrete Poem and it was displayed with other material at the opening event. He and I had always seen the building we were creating together as the architectural equivalent of a poem – as a poem-building.

2. FORM

Obviously it is an unpretentious, very simple little verse-form with ABCB in each verse. Each verse is rounded off with a full stop and tends to be in two two-line halves, so that it forms as it were a brick or layer of the poem, firm in itself. The repeated words 'concrete' and 'poem' run through, cementing the verses together.

3. LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

The metaphor is of a place-which-is-a-poem evoked in a poem-about-a-place. The image of light is for both understanding and illumination. This was taken up particularly by Malcolm in his design of the building, using natural light, having beautifully-designed lighting in the building, a dark and light side to the building and pools of light, as it were glades in the forest. The wooden shutters also draw back to 'open up' and stretch out to the world. What constitutes concrete, stones, sand and water, are evoked as metaphors for the practical, temporal and imaginative aspects of life, which come together here and take shape in a 'mould' prepared for them. The building will not just be a receptacle for life, but will itself constitute life.

It is assumed without contention that thinking needs to be fertilised by the imagination and that

intentions need to be ‘seen’, envisioned. People, however, in their meeting and mixing are the main ingredient, forming ‘the words of the poem’, which ‘will never be quite set’, but will continue to be created, avoiding any static fossilisation. The poem-building will be like an Indian Goddess with many heads and hands in ecstatic dance. It will require grace which comes only through sacrifice. It will create ‘the poetry of persons’. This must be my first use of the phrase, later to become the title of another poem and of my first pamphlet.

The concept of ‘persons’ and ‘the personal’ derivcs from my studies under John Macmurray at Edinburgh University in 1958. (His published Gifford Lectures were later called *The Self* as *Agent* and *Persons in Relation.*) His philosophical teachings distinguished between the pragmatic, aesthetic and moral modes of life, exemplified in the Romans, the Greeks and the Hebrews, and associated also respectively with inorganic matter, organic life and personal life in community. Macmurray also spoke of God as the infinite of the personal, comparable with Matter and Organic Life as the infinite or absolute of individual bits of matter or of organic life. The God of the Personal was also much in discussion in Iona Community theology at the time.

My love of India and Indian aesthetics made me see this ‘god of the personal’ as an Indian Goddess. Right enough, as I still think!

4. OUTCOME

The story of ‘A Poem about a Concrete Poem’ is an amazing one to me. I don’t know where the vision for the poem came from, but I can still see that vision. That it helped the Netherbow on its way – a place that has played a continuing supportive role in my creative life – followed by its embodiment in our beloved Tweeddale Court Scottish Poetry Library, followed by its transfiguration through Malcolm Fraser’s vision into the new Scottish Poetry Library, is to me a metaphor for the power of the creative energies, of what Teilhard de Chardin called ‘the noosphere’, to use us as instruments for their own purposes.

DARK NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

Swords rust in attics
regarded antiquated
non-conducive to material satisfaction.

Mental fight requires the word-in-hand
that sleeps not in its sheath
but wreaks a spiritual havoc:

A havoc like the hurricane of spirit
Geist – full of rampant gusts
to blow us wildly off the beaten track.

The flame that lights our life
is spluttering for lack of oxygen:
inspiration comes in frantic gasps.

* * *

Dark, mature, wise woman,

hidden part of god, revealed
to those alone who love her;

No emaciated ‘ghost’,
no father, son or virgin,
but *sophia,* black but comely.

Her favours will bring no high position
but parched, endless torment,
branded a troubadour.

Our song will be made welcome,
but we shall be cast out
from the castles of this world.

Our lady must disown us all the more
whom she will meet in secret.
Choose power then, or wisdom!

* * *

By night, O Nicodemus, you shall learn
of birth from god-the-Mother
if you watch while others sleep,

Nor put aside the sop she offers
bitter though it taste, sharp as betrayal:
the ultimate surrender: to be born.

Reward her ceaseless labour,
her great travail d’amour
to bring you where you may begin to breathe.

Reward her with your never-failing love,
your service in her cause,
your chariot racing through the realms of light.

She is the oxygen and you the flame;
she, the gale with tongues of fire
destroying our established habitations.

* * *

Run riot, *ruach,* through the world!
Let darkness cover us!
Our tombs will be deserted then at dawn.

Fools and Angels (Ramsay Head Press, 1984)

DARK NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

I. BACKGROUND

In the late 1970s and early '80s there was discussion about the female side of the godhead and how it had been overlooked, forgotten or deliberately suppressed, especially in the Protestant churches who had rejected Mariology. It seemed to me that the clue might lie with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, for some reason referred to as another masculine element of the Trinity, a somehow invisible creative force (that nevertheless in a feminine way brooded on the surface of the waters and descended in the form of a dove (Iona in Greek and Columba in Latin) that enabled and empowered, that would be 'poured out on all flesh in the last days'. (Some identify this with the age of Aquarius and see the unusual sign of 'a man with the pitcher', who leads the disciples to the Upper Room, as also a sign of Aquarius that would follow the Piscean/Christian age about to begin.)

In the Wisdom literature of the *Apocrypha* the spirit is understood to be the feminine spirit of Wisdom or Lady Philosophy. Her activity is described in almost the same terms as those in which Jesus describes the Spirit who 'bloweth where it listeth' (in the passage about Nicodemus, who came to him 'by night' and asked how a man could be born again). In the *Apocrypha,* Wisdom is described as *'more moving than any motion: she passeth and goeth through all things by reason of her pureness . . . And being but one, she can do all things: and remaining in herself, she maketh all things new: and in all ages entering into holy souls, she maketh them friends of God and prophets. She* is *more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of stars: being compared with the light she is found before it.'*

2. FORM

I use unrhymed triplets throughout the poem, which is divided into three sections of four, five and five verses each, with a final verse. The effect is to make strong statements in gusts or spurts, almost what can be said in one breath. There is play on the words for spirit in various languages and the poem tries to sweep along in a 'hurricane of spirit'.

3. LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

My title echoes the 'Dark Night of the Soul' described by St John of the Cross as the loss of all sense of the presence of God when the aspirant is getting close enough to let go of the world of the senses, yet has not quite reached the bliss of communion at the spiritual level. We tend to confuse soul and spirit, not quite sure what is which or which is what. In the Hebrew tradition spirit is the life-energy that breathes life into flesh or dry bones. The word in Hebrew is 'mach' which means a strong wind. In Greek the word is 'pneuma', which means air or breath and is again contrasted with 'sarx', flesh. Other words, such as 'nous' (mind) and 'psyche' (soul) are not the same. Psyche is formative of its own 'soma' or form, and nous is contrasted with 'kardia' – heart, feelings; whereas pneuma is much more to do with life-force, animation, that which gives life to matter.

In the first four verses I refer to the 'sword of the spirit' described by St Paul as the 'word of God' in his list of 'the whole armour of God'. I connect this with Blake's lines in *Jerusalem:* 'I shall not cease from mental fight nor shall my sword sleep in my hand'. If you take the 's' at the end of word(s) and put it in front you get sword. This is a sword that 'wreaks spiritual havoc' (Jesus' warning that he hasn't come to bring peace but a sword). It is destructive like a high wind or gale. I use the German word 'Geist', echoing our word 'ghost' and 'holy ghost' whose meaning seems emaciated compared with its origin in powerful 'gusts' of wind which blow us off course. Finally we need oxygen for flame, and we need inspiration, that is to breathe in air/pneuma/ruach/spirit.

In the next five verses I turn to the dark figure of Wisdom, Sophia, the black Madonna, the bride in the Song of Solomon, 'black but comely', the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba. She is dark because she is revealed only to those who seek her in love and devotion. To others she veils herself. Those who

follow her will not find favour in the world, because she will pretend to ignore them, allowing them only to meet her in secret like the Troubadour lover. She complements God as the yin, dark, cold, wet, female elements of the Tao. Wisdom comes when power is no longer sought. There must be surrender to her before her secrets are revealed.

In the third section I refer to Nicodemus, who was told he must be born again by water and the spirit. He was a respected Pharisee who came by night so as not to be seen consorting with Jesus. In Henry Vaughan's poem, 'Night', he extols the virtues of darkness and refers to Nicodemus. It has the wonderful lines:

There is in God (some say)
A deep but dazzling darkness;

Rilke writes in his *StundenBuch,* 'I love the dark hours of my being' and St John of the Cross sends his soul on its tryst 'en una noche oscura', crying 'Oh night that was my guide'. Giving birth implies divine motherhood (spoken of in the 14th century by Julian of Norwich in her *Revelations of Divine Love).* The sop was given to Judas before he went out into the night to betray Jesus and to set the divine birth-death passion/suffering on its course.

To be born is to be propelled to the new atmosphere where you must begin to breathe. There will be a flow of blood and water (such as gushed from the side of Jesus when he was speared while hanging on the Cross). It is a labour of love on the part of God the Mother. She needs to be rewarded by faithful love and service 'in her cause', which is the generation and sustaining of life. The 'chariot racing through the realms of light' is Apollo, the Sun-God, the opposite of Night. Day needs to serve Night. Indeed it was evening before morning in the Creation story and the Celts counted winter before summer and night before day in their calendars. In this formula death must also precede life. The oxygen for the flame, and the tongues of fire, refer to the Feast of Pentecost, when the spirit descended on the gathered disciples in 'tongues of fire' to the sound of a 'mighty rushing wind'. They found themselves able to speak in diverse languages.

The last verse simply invokes the riot of the spirit to run through the world, destroy our established habitations and let darkness cover us, as it covered Jesus in the tomb until the third day when the tomb was found empty. So may we also rise up and leave our tombs – our tombs of exploitative power, possessions, empires, riches, palaces, vanities.

4. OUTCOME

Keats described the experience of 'negative capability' in the process of gestating a poem. There is such a darkness, a period of surrender and unknowing, of waiting and suffering, in all creative work, as well as in natural childbirth. In this poem I am paying homage to the mysterious forces of creation, however and through whomever they manifest themselves. As a mother and a poet I have experience of both physical and spiritual birth-giving. What Jesus suffered was a form of creative agony in order to bring to birth a new age, an age of the spirit, as St Paul suggested when he wrote, 'the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now'. I recognise in this poem that if we invoke the creative spirit we will not be in for an easy time.

FEBRUARY 14th

The scene is set for me daily.
Again and again I paint it
as if an icon:

shall I make the cloak of the Virgin red?
How much to incline her head?
What proportion of sky
and cherubim, if any?
Where the square trap
door that leads to Hell?

Today's beauty lacks mercy:
calm, pale, unperturbed
in sleet, hail, keen wind.
Show it by nothing:
the hard edge of Hell's cliff,
by the very vacancy:
a walker straining forward
like dog on leash
but his dog unleashed in the wind.

Or shall I paint the mountain
as an elephant-god
fat, sleek, pregnant,
feet turned up
navel protruding
and wide, flat ears?
He is detached from predicaments
of weather or winter;
laughingly knows of desire's flame
never quenched to nirvana,
but lit anew in rock and sinew
year by year.

He is complete, content to be
gross, yet noble,
inevitable yet enabling.

Shadows from the Greater Hill (Ramsay Head Press, 1987)

FEBRUARY 14TH

1. BACKGROUND

This poem is part of the book *Shadows from the Greater Hill* in which the poem titles are date entries. The whole book is the poem, consisting of dated observations at different seasons and times of day over a year, from 9th March to 9th March, looking over Arthur's Seat and Holyrood Park in Edinburgh.

The idea was to be as objective as possible, recording what I saw from my window. The year is non-specific, although I worked on the poems throughout a specific year. When I came to compile the book I chose poems out of a great many, trying to achieve a balance throughout the year and between seasons, as also between subjective and objective. It was interesting to discover how subjective even the most objective exercises in observation can become.

After the book was published I remembered a book I had read about ten years earlier: *The Transformation of Nature in Art* by Ananda Coomeraswamy. It discusses Medieval European, Indian and Chinese philosophies of art and their understanding of the role of the artist. I felt I had unwittingly fulfilled some of those criteria, where the spirit and energy of a work is important rather than any attempt at realistic representation, e.g. 'Indian art can only be studied as showing at different times a greater or less degree of vitality, unity, grace, and the like, never of illusion.' In those traditions the individual artist is not seeking fame or success, but is rather offering him or herself as an instrument through which the elemental power-circuit of the universe can be channelled for the benefit of others.

2. FORM

The poem is in two halves, each consisting of two free verse stanzas. It is relatively prosaic in tone. The workaday craftsman is speaking, who is working on an icon on a traditional given theme. His skill lies in how he paints the familiar story or episode, not in novelty of ideas or subject matter. So in my poem I am looking at new ways of painting the given mountain.

3. LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

In the first verse I describe the task I am setting myself, not only in this poem but in the book as a whole. My icon is the scene outside my window. I ask myself design questions as if I were painting an icon of the Virgin Mary. There are certain fixtures. How I describe or transform them through my sense and consciousness into a poem is where the art lies. Art is artificial. Nature is natural. This is the work of transforming nature through art to become even more itself, yet stayed in the flux, captured in art and released from mortality. The language is fairly mundane and awkward for the working out of the proportions.

Icons were themselves actual objects made from the basic natural elements of the universe: animal, vegetable, mineral and spiritual; the wooden base, the white of egg in the gesso, the minerals in the paint and the sacred story depicted. The correct way to dispose of an icon is to float it down a river, face up, in order to return it to the universe whence it came.

In the second verse I describe the scene before me, beautiful but merciless, unmoved by cruel weather, which leashes the walker to the wind (spirit), whose dog (animal nature) is unleashed. There is alliteration of h's and v's in the middle and then the sound of the wind in 'leash' and 'unleashed'.

In the third verse I change the tune. There are other religions. Isn't the mountain more like Ganesh, the Indian elephant god? I describe the mountain as an elephant god, detached, laughing, aware that the cycle of life reincarnates eternally and has no connection with moralistic distinctions between good and evil. The language and rhythm becomes more flowing and lyrical.

In the last three lines I praise the mountain-as-elephant god. He is complete in himself and content to be 'gross yet noble' in a seeming contradiction, thereby enabling me to be more accepting of whatever comes or will come, less striving after perfection or justification. Although I say 'he' of Ganesh, in my conception of the mountain's divine aspect there is no male or female.

3.OUTCOME

I remember my parents telling me, when I was a child, that Arthur's Seat was like an elephant or a lion couchant. I could see these patterns, but in this series of poems I was trying to record my relationship with the scene and with Arthur's Seat in the present – on specific days at particular times. The relationship was not one of veneration on my part, nor of overlooking, but rather a participation in the scene, allowing it to express itself through me. This poem is a vital one in contributing to the book, in that it explains the nature of the task and helps to show how the book as a whole might be 'read'.

A DANCING INNOCENCE

‘You’ll change your life!’ wrote Rilke: touched by art –
an archaic torso of Apollo
primed with potent, ancient innocence
to span tomorrow’s manic dancing day
on stringent, dark, hyperborean wings
of revolution’s prehistoric cause.

Devoid of purpose, casual of cause,
our consciousness may sound the well of art,
empty of feeling empty, night and day
anonymous; but reasonable Apollo
was foiled by Daphne’s rooted innocence
and peace descends with tried, dynastic wings.

Ourselves the victims, as we dream of wings
and think our chrysalis an innocence,
with hope shrugged off in having lost a cause.
We suffer whims, abjectly, of Apollo
when ours it is to broach the rising day
with writhing, raw identity of art.

But nothing can be trusted that is art:
the marble is not hewn by fair Apollo.
We do not programme for the brush of wings,
nor tip the edge of consciousness, and cause
unloading of intended innocence
drop by drop to fill each day by day.

The dawning forehead of that destined day
will tear the membranes of our innocence
in brutish births to make a work of art –
and veiled velleities assuming wings,
imaginary Panpipes, will be cause
for mirth before the torso of Apollo.

Archaic and yet avant-garde Apollo –
stone to flesh by an essential art;
breath transpires with earth and dream with day,
consubstantiations giving cause
to *Nike* with her huge exultant wings
and revolution sprung from innocence.

Turn, Apollo. Burn. Outspread and cause
world wings to dare a dancing innocence,

initiation day of perfect art.

A Dancing Innocence (Macdonald Publishers, Edinburgh, 1988)

A DANCING INNOCENCE

1. BACKGROUND

The title poem of the book is a sestina inspired by reading Rilke's poem 'An Archaic Torso of Apollo' which famously ends with the line *'You will change your life',* in the active rather than the more usual passive: your life will be changed. I had been reading and translating Rilke a good deal at that time (in the early 1980s). I was changing my life to put my dedication to poetry before other duties. This had led me into the Herculean task of getting the Scottish Poetry Library started and had contributed to the break-up of my marriage after twenty-five years.

I thought constantly about poetry: what it is essentially, what is the poet's relationship with it and what is the poet's role in society. I wrote and published articles and gave many talks on these topics. I always asked for poetry to be regarded as an art-form and treated accordingly, rather than as 'a tiny fraction of English literature', as one Education mogul put it, when refusing help with funding a touring van at the SPL. This poem was born out of that ferment of thinking, striving, writing, speaking and doing.

2. FORM

The poem is a sestina: that means it consists of six stanzas, each of six pentameter lines. The end words to the lines of the first stanza are repeated as end words to the lines in the subsequent five stanzas, beginning in each case with the last word of the preceding stanza. The poem concludes with an envoy in which all six key words appear. The effect of the repetition of end words is perhaps comparable to that of a ball being bounced or hit against a wall. The regularity soothes, while the differences of emphasis or of meaning in each reappearance of a word are, at the same time, heightened.

All regular forms in poetry are based on dance-patterns; and the sestina might be thought of as a dance that turns regularly on the heel with a strong downbeat, or as a piece of music that comes back again and again to the same notes or chords. 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. The sestina, though, has a heaviness, almost a weariness, certainly a solid insistence, like that of dogged survival under hardship. The artist suffers however much the art takes wing, and that comes through in the weight of the sestina's relentless form.

3. LANGUAGE

The language is dense and alliterative, packing in as much allusion and passion as possible, while continuing a logical argument. The six key words are: art, Apollo, innocence, day, wings, cause. The word 'art' ends the first and last lines of the whole poem and wraps up the content of the poem as alpha and omega.

4. CONTENT

Beginning with the quotation from Rilke and the title of his poem, the first verse describes the classical Greek headless, armless statue in the Louvre labelled 'an archaic torso of Apollo' as primed with ancient innocence, such as will span a dancing future. The dark hyperborean wings are those of Apollo who was said to leave Delphi and spend winters in the dark north. This is interpreted as the

fact that the constellation of the lyre, associated with Apollo, is visible in clear northern skies during the winter (or was in that era).

In the second verse, reason and innocence, peace and stability prevail in an almost Buddhist detachment, perhaps a 'negative capability'. The third verse describes the depression that can make us curl up without hope in a chrysalis, when we want to be facing each new day courageously with raw new art.

In the fourth verse the unpredictability of art is highlighted. It can't be trusted or programmed for. It doesn't come from consciousness or Apollonian rationality. We can't intend innocence. The fifth verse describes art in terms of birth, painful and irreparable; while the hypocritically charming, pretty, classical/arcadian will be 'cause for mirth' when compared to the primitive strength of the Apollo torso.

The sixth verse returns to the transformative powers and processes of art, the exchanging of energies and substances between stone and flesh, breath and earth, dream and day. There is a reference to the huge winged statue, the Nike (Victory) of Samothrace, also in the Louvre, and to the innocence at the heart of revolution.

The last three lines bring in all six words: calling for Apollo to revive a dancing innocence and lead us to 'a perfect art'.

5. OUTCOME

It could be said that the passion that packed itself into this sestina issued in my determined work for the SPL. I had already started the School of Poets and wrote the poem during a School of Poets weekend we held at Newbattle in late 1982. Not only did the archaic torso perhaps change Rilke's life, his poem about it changed mine, and my poem about his poem may continue the momentum of change, avoiding the pseudo and aiming at an art that is both revolutionary and innocent, winged and earthed, daring to strive for perfection at whatever cost.

LOVE/KNOWLEDGE

The university: entirety
in its diversity
which to know is to be clever
to understand is to be learned
to love is to be wise.

Do we begin with the detail or with the whole?
do we think with words or speak with thoughts?
do we learn with logic or with emotion –
emotion, the whiteness from which we abstract
separate colours, the silence from which we utter?

He learnt the names and dates
and charted events on maps
to explore and travel in history,
unravel the stories behind the telling.

He discussed war and famine,

movements of population, the rise
and fall of kings, the
machinations of popes, the whims
of emperors, the struggle
of human beings to find a justice
between the one and the many,
an absolute and its infinite petty necessities.

One afternoon in the library he was drawn
to a book as if it called to him:
it was named a book of verse, but felt a universe.

Deep and deeper it led him
passage by passage
into the rose garden
where soil in its immensity
and tiny granularity,
every valiant stem and delicate tendril,
patterned leaf and stubborn thorn
with insects, birds, butterflies,
worms and clouds,
sun, rain and wind,
in a complicated dance of energies –
flower in the rose.

The flowering of the rose is all that matters:
material, it yet cannot be touched.

A bud of knowledge opened in him
and the petals of his mind received the dew.

Seven Valleys (Ramsay Head Press, 1991)

LOVE/KNOWLEDGE

1. BACKGROUND
Seven Valleys is in seven parts. In each part (except for the seventh) there are seven poems. The names of the valleys, which are also the headings for each part and the titles of each poem within the seven parts, are taken from *The Conference of Birds,* a twelfth century mystical classic by the Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar. The names of the valleys translated into English are *Search, Love, Knowledge, Detachment, Unity, Amazement, Annihilation.* Each poem has, as it were, a double coding, e.g. Search/Search or Love/Unity or Knowledge/Amazement or Detachment/Annihilation. The book-poem offers a multi-layered experience of the meaning of human life in the twentieth century, with elements of a biography of an 'Everyman'. In the poem here discussed, Love is the heading of the second part and Knowledge is the third poem in that part.

2. FORM
The Knowledge poems in each part are in free verse. This one is in the form of an unrhymed ode, with varying rhythms, line length and verse length. The poem reveals itself as it goes along, even as

knowledge does in the course of experience.

3. LANGUAGE AND CONTENT

In the first verse there is a play on the word ‘university’: it is all and everything, the one and the many, the unified and the diversified. The distinction between knowledge as cleverness, learnedness and wisdom is concisely defined.

The second verse questions how we begin to know anything. Where do we begin, with microcosm or macrocosm? How does thinking work? What part (or whole) does emotion play?

In the third and fourth verses an academic approach to history is briefly described. In the fifth verse a book draws the attention of the researcher to it in the library and he starts to read it, feeling as if he has the universe in his hands.

In the sixth verse the rose garden is entered, a metaphor belonging to medieval and troubadour literature. The phrase ‘passage by passage’ could refer to the book or to the maze in the garden. The metaphor of the rose garden includes everything large or tiny, living and growing, earth and sky, combining ‘in a complicated dance of energies’ to ‘flower in the rose’, which thus becomes a symbolic embodiment of the universe.

In the next two lines the revelation comes that it is not the rose that matters but its flowering, an immaterial, untouchable and eternal process.

In the last two lines the metaphor is extended to the budding of knowledge within the mind, which opens up like petals to receive ‘the dew’, born of the interaction of sun and soil, heaven and earth, moisture of generation, blessing, wisdom.

4. OUTCOME

It is possible to read all the Search poems, or all the Love or Knowledge poems etc., in sequence, rather than to read the book sequentially. A verse form is chosen for each of the named valleys whenever they recur. The Knowledge poem in the first part is the story of bafflement and despair at the hell-fire sermons preached in church, the goodness of the people who are supposedly damned and the beauty of nature around them in the Hebrides. Eventually, going to the door that was banging in a storm, Jesus is found outside, ‘the loveliness of all lovely desires’ (a quotation from the *Carmina Gadelica).* In part three, in contrast, the Knowledge poem is a fairly factual description of how radar works. And in part four it is about the craft of printing. In part five it is about waiting and in part six about loving. You could say that knowledge seems to be found in experiencing the ‘necessary connections’, ultimately in the interaction between above and below; and in coming to understand that without this, knowledge falls short of wisdom.

NOT IN A GARDEN

For some the agony is not in a garden:
the voice of the priest reading aloud
could be heard above the clatter of silent eating
and commotion of private misery, as novices,
spiritually battered, won through to almost the end
of another day. It was an account by Sister Emmerich,
who fled massacre in France a century before,
telling of ‘the Agony in the Garden.’
He began to shake with sobs and left the table,

his crust uneaten. In this human crush isolated,
unable to talk, write, think, dovetail poetry.

Today he'd received a letter, opened by the Jesuit Fathers,
from Robert Bridges concerning poetry:
Your theory of 'inscape' eludes me.
Pull the petals off a flower, fell an elm
and show me where 'that being indoors each one dwells.'
Gerard could not reply. He had written the one letter
permitted in a month, to reassure his mother
his health did not suffer from fasting or flagellation.
It did suffer, he did not tell her, from
'discipline of the eyes' – keeping them downcast
so as not to see the colours of the kestrel
or clouds in whorls of crimson.

He had burnt his poems: 'The Slaughter of the Innocents',
his children, his yield like the trees'.
Not remorselessly, but relentlessly, he had killed them.
Cut open a brain and where is memory?
Where is the sense of beauty and the faculty
that responds to *inscape*, – those 'dearest
freshness, deep down things' – call it by codename
grace or christ or soul or sakti or morphic
field, implicate order, individuation?

We glide in and out of our inscape
like a camera focusing and, sharp, we become
ourselves and poems sheer off our wings
like light on water, heedless, effortless,
bird in the dawn beyond the mist.

But among the olives his sweat like blood,
his friends unconscious and it went on,
hour after hour, with the cup forced to his lips
until he gave in, took in, let in, the violation
of death invading life.

What else shall be sacrificed?
Nine altars, passive, tall in solid stone,
now a ruin in stately gardens
at Fountains Abbey built right over the river;
nine altars for the Virgin, or the
three-times triple goddess, whose
name is unmentionable, it is too holy.
Deleted from history and untied from religion,
she pours her tincture, a cruse of
all that adheres yet changes and has its inscape
without paring – excess is not enough.

For some the agony is not in a garden:
for the Kurdish woman who flees to the mountains,
her children barefoot in sleet, her husband killed,
her baby pushing for birth and she stumbles
in terror. Gunmen at her back, no help,
no food or shelter. Innocents slaughtered
and woman's crucifixion to be with child,
with her children and unable to save them,
yet knowing herself appointed a Guardian of Life.

Nine altars cut open a brain he shook with sobs
and left the table it went on hour after hour
in this human crush isolated unable to save them
what else shall be sacrificed?

Medusa Dozen and other poems (Ramsay Head Press, 1994)

NOT IN A GARDEN

1. BACKGROUND

The inspiration for this poem came from reading, in a biography of Gerard Manley Hopkins by Robert Bernard Martin, of an incident one Christmas when Hopkins was a novice at the Jesuit Training College, Manresa, near Roehampton. 'He was on retreat and having dinner in silence listening to the lector for the day. One of his fellow novices was reading Sister Emmerich's account of the Agony in the Garden.' (Sister Emmerich was an exiled nun who believed she had inexplicably relived Christ's agony.) Hopkins 'began to cry and sob and could not stop'.

The Agony in the Garden is the Gospel account of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before his betrayal and arrest. The disciples fell asleep, although he asked them to watch and pray. Jesus was left to pray alone and struggle to accept the terrible death he was facing: 'and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.'

At the time I wrote the poem the Kurds were being expelled from Iraq, walking over the mountains in winter to the Turkish border. The agony of being a mother trying to protect and care for her children in terrible circumstances seemed to me even worse than agony over one's own fate. The suffering of Jesus and of refugees is also compared in the poem to Hopkins' suffering as a poet among the Jesuits. He had destroyed all his poems on becoming a novice and had referred to this as 'the slaughter of the innocents'. This is a reference to Herod's killing of all the children under two years old in and around Bethlehem, after learning of Jesus' birth as 'King of the Jews' from the three wise men. Hopkins had felt as if he was slaughtering his children in destroying his poems.

The poem connects these three 'agonies': that of the refugee mother, that of the poet destroying his poems and that of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Another element leading up to the Kurdish refugee mother is a description of Fountains Abbey with its Chapel of the Nine Altars. The nine tall columns remain highstanding in the abbey ruins (although a window was later inserted taking out one column). The nine altars seem to speak of the triple goddess of fertility and regeneration linked also to the nine creative muses. Three times three is a particularly powerful pagan and female number. The 'inscape' of the goddess cannot be obliterated despite consistent efforts to do so through the centuries.

2. FORM

Although the rhythm is more or less regular with four, five or six stresses a line, the poem is not in any fixed metre. It gets carried along, however, by the urgency of the rhythm and has the effect of dramatic blank verse. There is a narrative element in the poem, with the verses acting more or less as paragraphs. They are mostly long verses of eleven or twelve lines, the breaks being to switch from Hopkins, to his situation, to his poetry, to Jesus, to the goddess, to the Kurds.

In the last verse a technique is used of picking up phrases from earlier in the poem an juxtaposing them in a jerky way, as if the poem is breaking up, even as Hopkins broke down in tears for his children/poems upon hearing the story of the nun in exile reliving Jesus' Agony in the Garden.

3. LANGUAGE

The language is straightforward narrative, using sentences that continue over several lines. It is suffused with allusions to and quotations from Gerard Manley Hopkins' own poems and refers to his theory of 'inscape', not understood by medical student Robert Bridges, his main literary correspondent. Hopkins coined the term to describe the individual essence of things which we can sense when we pay them due attention. Everything has a 'within' of its own, and acts by what he called 'instress' to express this, to 'selve'. Hopkins adapted this idea from thirteenth century Duns Scotus' philosophy of 'haeccitas': thisness.

Teilhard de Chardin and, more recently, Rupert Sheldrake have presented similar ideas, Sheldrake using the term 'morphic resonance'. Sheldrake points out that memory is not locatable physically within our brains or even in brain cell interaction, but is perhaps rather in a 'morphic field', like an enveloping, energising aura or 'soul' that sustains and stabilises the organism through its continual life changes. Such ideas have been common to poets and mystics (e.g. Blake and Meister Eckhart) throughout the ages.

4. CONTENT

To elucidate verse by verse: the first stanza states at the outset that there are other agonies comparable with that of Jesus: 'For some the agony is not in a garden.' It then describes the scene in the refectory when Hopkins began to sob and left the table, feeling isolated from his fellows and prevented from expressing his true nature (inscape) by the deprivations of the College regime.

The second stanza tells how, when he received a letter from Robert Bridges, it brought the heartache of not being understood. The mechanistic, medical mind wanted material evidence for 'inscape', an immaterial phenomenon. 'That being indoors each one dwells' is a quotation from Hopkins' poem 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire'. Letter-writing was restricted and Hopkins had written to his mother that month, so could not reply to Bridges. He had reassured his mother about fasting and flagellation but did not tell her of the far worse suffering he endured in not looking up when walking – so-called 'discipline of the eyes'. As Hopkins writes in 'Hurrahing in Harvest': 'I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes', and in poems like 'God's Grandeur', 'The Windhover', 'Starlight Night' we find how he exulted in looking up.

In the third verse the terrible deed of destroying his poems is described, with allusion to his four-line cry of despair 'Trees by their yield/ Are known but 1/ My sap is sealed,/ My root is dry.' written towards the end of his life (he died aged 47) in Dublin. The poem then goes on to challenge the rational, 'scientific' approach which would cut open the brain to look for memory or the sense of beauty, or our faculty for responding to the uniqueness of the other, quoting from 'God's Grandeur': 'dearest freshness, deep down things'. It suggests that words used by scientists like Sheldrake and David Bohm (morphic field, implicate order) or Jung (individuation) are trying to express the same kind of experience as religious terminology, whether Christian or Hindu. The last five lines of this verse describe how, when we find ourselves, our 'inscape', it is as if everything comes into focus for us and poems 'sheer off our wings/ like light on water' or a bird glimpsed in a moment of clarity at

dawn through an early mist.

A short fourth verse brings the poem back to the scene in Gethsemane when Jesus asks that the cup pass from him, but at last accepts it, allowing death to violate and invade his life.

The fifth verse looks at Fountains Abbey, North Yorkshire, and the goddess, who has also been put to death in that she has been 'deleted from history and untied from religion'. (The word 'religion' means tied, cf. ligament.) A cruse of oil that never failed was given to the woman who helped the prophet Elijah. The goddess of the fertility religions promises the unfailing regeneration of nature, in which life is formed (adheres) yet constantly changes. With her, with nature, each thing will have its 'inscape' to the full. It will not be pared down. 'Excess is not enough' – the opposite of the harsh, restricting, self-afflicting regime of the Jesuit brethren.

In the sixth verse the picture is of the agony of the refugee Kurdish woman, whose 'crucifixion' is to be 'unable to save' her children, yet as a woman to know herself, like the goddess, 'a Guardian of Life'.

The last four lines juxtapose key phrases from the poem, ending with the rhetorical question 'what else shall be sacrificed?' We've sacrificed the god-man Jesus, the goddess of fertility, living women and children, the poetry of a uniquely gifted poet. The agony continues in the constant 'mental fight' for life and love, beauty and creativity against repression, cruelty, violence and indifference. In one sense the poem is about the futility of sacrifice; in another about the necessity for it. Life depends on it.

SACRED CITY

The old makes beautiful what we sense as new
as skyline over High Street and Canongate
in floodlit outlined shining message
graces the vision of New Town windows.

The Outlook Tower is white as a candle stem
for Patrick Geddes gave us his sign of hope,
a look-out post, a lasting beacon,
humanly making connections earthwise.

This city keeps her principles castle clear
and will not waive them casually with a nod
to tourist, banker, student, planner,
visitor, conference speaker, trader.

We live our days in shadow and sidelong sun.
What we attempt is battered by wind and cold.
The Old Town Geddes touched will slowly
yield with reserve her warmer closes.

We make our sacred sites by our daily work
and money cannot turn them upsides for profit.
Neglect may leave their spirit intact
flowing anew when discovered quietly.

No need to shout and label and publicise.
No need to claim top prizes or new awards,
compete and count and measure matter.
Rather continue in thought and wonder.

When it works it feels like play (Ramsay Head Press, 1998)

SACRED CITY

1. BACKGROUND

In 1997 I was at a Christmas party given by the European Commission in Princes Street, looking out to the Old Town, with the Castle and the Outlook Tower floodlit. At that time there was rival bidding between Glasgow and Edinburgh to be City of Architecture. In the Old Town the closes and wynds were being cleaned and tidied up and to some extent prettified with trendy statues and plaques. Newfangled shops, bars and restaurants were appearing. It felt as if our old haunts were not going to be allowed to remain old.

I have lived in Edinburgh since 1948, was a student in the 1950s, have lived in Musselburgh, the Grange, Stockbridge, Morningside and Meadowbank. I've worked in Queensferry Road and studied at what used to be Napier College and at Craiglockhart College of Education. Longest of all I've worked in the High Street at the Netherbow in the 1970s and in Tweeddale Court from 1984–99. I've seen much change, much improvement, some tasteless new buildings, the loss of local shops such as bakers, fishmongers, grocers. I was myself responsible for making Tweeddale Court more welcoming, with a municipal seat outside the Scottish Poetry Library and planting a clematis and roses in the courtyard, where we initiated 'Courtyard Readings' during the Festival in 1988; we had to wait until the Housing Association building site was finally cleared up, replacing the New Palace Cinema demolished in 1984.

I felt a pang of nostalgia for my old haunts while admiring the beauty of the floodlit outline of the Lawnmarket that Christmas.

2. FORM

I decided that only an alcaic ode could do justice to the city, could pay homage to it with sufficient grace and dignity. This is a precise syllabic Greek metre pattern, transcribed into a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in English. The skill lies in allowing each word its normal speech stresses and the pattern does the rest: carries the poem on a steady counterpointed rhythm over which the 'tune' of the meaning can be played. It is a quiet, reflective, measured, aesthetic, descriptive and evocative form. I learned it from translating the German romantic poet Ho1derlin, and have successfully used it since for particular poems of my own, e.g. Water West Coast.

The pattern is u–u–u–uu–u
u–u–u–uu–u
u–u–u–u–u
–uu–uu–u–u

The indentation is essential to the form, showing the first two lines to be the same, the third line to be regular, rather monotonous short and long, followed by a last line of each verse having a more tripping rhythm.

3. LANGUAGE

In an alcaic ode the language needs to be fairly formal and dignified, with each syllable being given

its due weight as in normal speech. The pattern demands an unstressed syllable at the end of lines three and four in each verse. This requires some finesse in saying what you want to say in normal words in their normal order within the strict alcaic metrics.

The language is of declaration or statement. Others may disagree with the stance taken, but it is not presented as a debating point. It is taken without apology and is authoritative, in that it is the author's view based on experience and consideration.

4. CONTENT

'The old makes beautiful what we sense as new.' The New Town is itself old but the Old Town is what makes it beautiful, offering its outstanding skyline, floodlit and clear in the dark of winter.

In the second verse attention is drawn to the Outlook Tower, not built by Patrick Geddes but developed by him into a symbol of the local and the global. He did build Ramsay Garden, whose outline contributes to the Old Town skyline so dramatically. The Outlook Tower is white and in the shining floodlight looked like a candle in a dark world.

In the third verse the clear outline of the Castle seen from any direction is used as a symbol of solid, clear principles, which will refuse to be compromised by market forces and commercialism.

In the fourth verse the tough severity of our climate and the extraordinary play of sun and shadow we enjoy throughout the year are seen as illustrating our character and lifestyle. Nothing is easy. We receive only 'sidelong sun' (occasional shafts of encouragement) and a lot of shadow (disinterest). On top of that we are battered down in our creative efforts.

However the Old Town is also protective. Patrick Geddes moved back to live in it at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and began restoration and conservation work in it. He saw the Old Town as the heart of the city and wanted to revive our interest and knowledge in our own Scottish/Celtic history and mythology with pageants, paintings, music, poetry and stained glass. He wanted a statue of St Columba in the Lawnmarket for instance.

In the fifth verse the theory is offered that daily work and regular care is what makes a place sacred, rather than upgrading for profit. Sometimes neglected corners can keep a spiritual quality intact that is destroyed by commercial exploitation in the name of progress and profit.

In the final verse this is taken further: we shouldn't need continual public relations and marketing, City of Architecture labels and such gimmicks. If we have authentic, historical buildings being used in an appropriate way for a living purpose, and if we revere them and pay them due attention, there should be no need for endless parties and fireworks (though this is not stated explicitly). Human 'thought and wonder' are what restore and conserve a city.

5. OUTCOME .

My experience of working, almost living, in Tweeddale Court (being the first to go there after its restoration from dereliction by Robin Hodge in the early 1980s) and giving it my human love and care is probably what lies behind the passion of this poem.

We welcomed everyone in the Scottish Poetry Library and many thousands of tourists from all over the world, as well as every other kind of person. I remember an Italian student once saying 'You did me more knowing about Scotland in two hours than I could in two years.' In other words, we did not treat people as exploitable dollar-fodder, for whose preconceived expectations we should jump through hoops and endlessly party, but we treated them with respect as really wanting to know and understand the real Edinburgh in the real Scotland and participate in our working lives.

The poem is a plea for substance rather than show, for a genuine living culture to share with others rather than a circus. To discover for oneself is infinitely more satisfying than to have something pushed at you. We should continue in our reserve, our uniqueness and difference, if we want our city to remain 'sacred', with its spirit intact, both for us and for others.