**The Inner Anthology**

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Earlier this year, I received a letter from a friend in which he told me that his mother had just died:

Please excuse my long silence but my mother passed away four months ago. All her life she memorised poems and occasionally recited them to me. And now they have vanished with her, every one of them. They were a part of my growing up.

When I phoned him up he said exactly the same thing, not only about the loss of his mother but of her many poems. ‘I have been trying to remember the titles – the ones she told me. But I would know them if I heard them again.’

The letter has stuck in my mind because I wish I had met this woman. I am, at heart, a bit superstitious. I like to think that every time someone bothers to remember a poem they add to its value in some vital way, even if the words are kept entirely to themselves. But how many people now commit their favourite verses to memory?

It is not always an easy thing to do and it may seem a rather futile and time-consuming pastime. Why bother to remember a poem when you can simply photocopy it, download it or scribble it onto a scrap of paper? Why bother – for that matter – to remember *anything* these days? Laura and I went to a wedding in July and it was incredible how the congregation resembled a film crew: throughout the service people were fiddling about with their camcorders, microphones and digital cameras, turning what could have been a special memory into a cheap video. What chance do poems have in an age when the act of memory itself seems to count for so little?

And so, to help further the cause of what I call *The Inner Anthology*, this personal store of remembered poems, I have included here a few thoughts and pointers. *The Inner Anthology* is an invisible book that varies from editor to editor. It takes a lifetime to compile, it will never be finished or published, it uses no paper, cardboard bindings, string, glue or ink and it vanishes altogether at the moment of your death, but I still believe it is one of the most important books we take up. Surely the best way to know a poem is to commit it to memory.

**1. A remembered poem is not like a remembered ‘fact’**

I say ‘to know’ a poem, but ‘know’ is the wrong word. ‘Know’ implies that something is finished with, mapped out, possessed. But I have come to realise that *The Inner Anthology* is less of a possession than a relationship, something which develops across time. When a poem is memorised you can take it everywhere; you can mull it over before you go to sleep, or you might say it to yourself in the supermarket or during a walk. And it is incredible how even the shortest poems can yield new shades and depths in different moments. I remember reciting Larkin’s ‘The Trees’ on the top of a double decker bus one spring and for some reason I heard the solitude within Larkin’s voice for the first time. On the bus the poem had the quality of an uttered thought held in place before the rest of the day’s concerns took over. Perhaps this is because I was also alone at that moment and travelling to work (Larkin’s poems are made for the solitary trudge to and from work, and yet you will only discover this if you have the thing in your head). Which reminds me that . . .

**2. *The Inner Anthology* always works well on public transport**

I do not own a car and my life is plagued by delayed buses and cancelled trains, yet I have come to pity people who only travel by car. They miss so much necessary tedium. Public transport offers acres and acres of bleak, meditative space, ideal for flicking through *The Inner Anthology* and finding out what it has to say. In the busiest train station, in the most horrendous rush hour, I can bring Wordsworth’s ‘Stepping Westward’ to my mind and this can provide an evocative voice-over to the busy rush all about me, like a scene in a Tarkovsky film. The right poem can act as a perfect accompaniment to the grey, wet English footage glimpsed on the other side of the window and I often feel, in such moments, that I am directing one of John Betjeman’s old poetry programmes. Just as a Walkman changes the way everywhere looks, so an inner-poem can comment upon wherever you choose to say it to yourself. I can hear a poem anywhere without having to fiddle about with bits of paper.

You will find, eventually, that certain poems are ideally suited for those places where you least want to be. I had a string of job interviews recently (none of which were successful) but I found that ‘All places that the eye of heaven visits . . .’ from *Richard II* is just the thing to bring to mind as my train pulls in and I prepare for my doom in some godforsaken university campus. Bus and train stations are especially good places in which to read *The Inner Anthology* as you watch other people standing anxiously by their suitcases, getting ready to depart or waiting for loved ones to arrive. There have been times when I have hoped a train would be a bit more delayed just so I could stay in that place a little longer with the voice of the poem. For there is always a great deal that needs to be done with *The Inner Anthology*.

**3. I Have A Memory Like A Sieve**

Just as a poem can never be ‘known’ as an objective fact, then neither should it be perfectly remembered. In fact the best way to draw closer to your poems is to commit them to memory and then forget them the next day (a skill which, in my case, comes naturally). My remembered anthology is continually falling into tatters; lines, stanzas, entire verses keep going missing from my poems and there is constant restoration work to be done as I stand there and try to fathom out how all the words fit back together. And this restoration work is always meaningful, always telling.

I am waiting at Penzance bus station and I decide to recite Wordsworth’s ‘To A Butterfly’ to myself (a poem I have been carrying about for five or so years), when suddenly I come unstuck, on the very first verse:

Stay near me – do not take thy flight!

A little longer stay in sight!

Much converse do I find in thee,

Historian of my infancy!

Float near me; do not yet depart!

Thou bring’st, gay creature as thou art!

A solemn image to my heart,

My father’s family!

It sounds good, it feels almost right, but at the same time I am not satisfied with it. Yet a poem always lets me know if it is not complete; I feel an absence, like a half-hearted handshake. And with this poem I always have the same trouble. For the same line continually slips through my fingers: ‘Dead times revive in thee’ – like an illusive butterfly.

Once I realise the line is missing (*if* I realise it is missing) I then have to work out where it should go. I usually want to place it after ‘infancy’ so I put it there and repeat the poem to myself with the missing fragment in place, but it is still not right. On a good day I will arrive at my destination with the line in the correct place (it follows ‘do not yet depart’) and by then I have also made a kind of inner journey with the poem. For one only begins to learn about a poem – in all its hidden corners – when it is partially forgotten. One reason I keep forgetting ‘Dead times . . .’ is that the poem takes a sudden, solemn leap with that line. So far, we have had lighter, butterfly thoughts of ‘flight’, ‘infancy’, ‘much converse’ and then we suddenly fall into old ‘dead times’ with a dull thud. Not only that but the entire rhythm of the poem is kept on pause at that point and you realise that Wordsworth’s rhyming scheme is not a regular one. The line is, literally, out of place and purposefully so. Try to memorise the next verse and you will run into similar problems because he changes the rhyming scheme yet again, at the very point where you least expect it. In other words, this apparently simple poem about memory has something like a quiet shudder built into it. I only realised how ingenious this was when the poem itself began to fall apart in my mind.

**4. Beware of people who try to impress you, over dinner, with their own store of remembered poems and do not be tempted to play ball**

Poems were not written for cheap memory games but to console and enlighten and if made to play party tricks they will generally desert you. At least they ought to. The best thing about a remembered poem is that it will come (often with singular clarity) when the time is right. There may be times when this rightness coincides with a social gathering but in my experience this is usually a mistake and only ever works in films. As a rule keep your poems to yourself.

**5. Unless you feel the moment is right. Or you are giving a poetry class**

For there is really nothing like listening to someone reciting a poem by heart. I find that I attend to the thoughts and feelings instead of just scanning a text and this is because a more intimate relationship is established between the teller and the life of the poem.

At school, I frequently lost concentration during poetry classes, mainly because I was reading the poem when I should have been listening to it. It is the same with Dickens; people often make the mistake of reading Dickens, when all you need to do is just open the page and listen to him. The best way to teach poetry is to begin by reciting it by heart. Then, you give out the handouts and recite it once again, this time following the printed page.

Or better still, why not forget the printed handouts altogether; just recite the poem from memory, then dictate it so that everyone in the class has a complete copy before them, made in their own handwriting. This may sound ridiculously ambitious, and even a bit scary, but I have tried it many times and it gets the class off on a completely different footing. You will also find that by the end of the class most of your students will have remembered the poem without even noticing it. It is curious how a poem becomes more memorable when it has been heard through someone else’s memory. I once heard Alan Bennett reciting Larkin’s short poem ‘The Trees’ and this marked the day when I began to commit it to memory. I am sure that the words became all the more real to me for not having been spoken from the page. The poem had become a real part of Alan Bennett and I wanted to make it a part of me too.

**6. Shakespeare – A digression**

It always irritates me when I hear theatre critics quibbling over new productions of Shakespeare. If I were a theatre critic I would find it hard to resist saying, out loud: ‘And they remembered every single word of it! All the way through!’ For if I see a production of *Hamlet* or *Richard II* this is one aspect of the experience which never fails to astound me. ‘How did they remember all of that?’ I wonder, as my chair folds up behind me. This is why I usually feel such a huge sense of relief when the play is over and I know that the actors got through such a remarkable feat of memory in one piece. And many people in the audience, I believe, think the same thing. I find that I come away from Shakespeare wishing I could remember it and perform it for myself.

And isn’t this one of the main reasons why we go to see a Shakespeare play – to feel encouraged by the knowledge that all of these people, the entire cast, actually committed the words to memory and so perpetuated the language in its deepest cultural form by making it a part of themselves. I have a few bits of Shakespeare in my inner anthology, but not all of *Hamlet* or *The Merchant of Venice*. But if I were an actor at the end of a long career, imagine how infinitely richer those long bus journeys would be.

And this is why Shakespeare rarely works on TV or on film. A film is made up of hundreds of short sequences, all performed separately and then stitched together in the editing suite. As an audience we remain unconvinced that the work we witnessed has been committed to living memory. Our sense of our literary heritage has been flattered but also subtly undermined.

**7. But how do I choose which poems go in *The Anthology*? And how do I put them in?**

Again, it is not really a matter of choice – your poems will choose you. If you encounter a poem that speaks to your innermost self it will go in your brain almost without your noticing it. Bits of lines stick out like awkward twigs and catch at my sleeves until I have to go back to the printed word and start the work of remembering it. Sometimes a fragment of line comes to me in a confused or mutilated form:

. . . your angels round trombones . . . and . . . your number crunching infinities!

I cannot quite remember where it came from so I write the weird bit down and then later trace it to its source, which makes the experience all the more intriguing. Eccentric as this may seem, I am convinced that all of these words and bits of lines which tumble out of me on station platforms are there for a reason. I feel the same about my dreams.

At the round earth’s imagined corners blow

Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise

From death, you numberless infinities

Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go;

All whom the flood did, and fire shall o’erthrow,

Once you find the poem, copy it out into a portable notebook and look over the words every now and then. There will come a day when you will need to actively learn the poem but by this time you will already have the bare bones in place. And in any case, don’t worry too much about all the learning or knowing because you also need to partially forget the poem for *The Inner Anthology* to really take off. For further advice about remembering poems I would recommend Ted Hughes’ anthology *By Heart*, a true homage to the work of memory. The poems he chooses are naturally his and not necessarily yours, but the introduction, in which Hughes explains his own unusual method of memorising poems, is fascinating.

Of course, when you die, *The Inner Anthology* – your entire life’s work – dies with you, but with a bit of luck, you might at least be remembered as someone who remembered.