



Richard Marggraf Turley Q&A

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In 2007 poet Richard Marggraf Turley won the Keats-Shelley Prize for 'Elisions', his work on the subject of slavery. Marggraf Turley is a senior lecturer at Aberystwyth University and in November 2007 he answered a few questions for us:



When did you begin writing poetry?

I started to write poetry, as opposed to writing about it, at a relatively late stage. In fact my first poems weren't published until 2006, when two sequences entitled 'Forest' and 'Giants' were accepted by Poetry Wales.

The journal's editor, writer Robert Minhinnick, has been wonderfully encouraging, and was kind enough to nominate 'Giants' for a Prize. So it goes to show, it's never too late to begin channelling the muse. It's also worth remembering that Yeats didn't write his best work until his fifties.

Of course, it's never too early to begin writing, either, especially if you're in a hurry, like Keats. I must be somewhere in the middle, at 37. Actually, Ian McMillan recently introduced me on Radio 3's The Verb as a 'young poet'. I have to say, I liked the sound of that. I suppose it's just about true, if you count in 'ink' years.

Can you tell us how you go about writing poetry?

Some poets like to compose as they walk. Wordsworth was keen on that. Others like to hole up. I don't really have any particular rituals. Words and phrases can arrive unexpectedly, and I'll rush into a newsagents for pen and paper. A whole poem might materialize that way.

Usually, things need time to be processed. They have to live in the lappets for a while. Poetry can be hard work, although it comes down to inspiration in the end. If I haven't written a poem for a while, I get anxious there might not be another one. You can't take anything for granted.

Your new work *The Fossil-Box draws on the Forest of Dean and the Ceredigion Coast*, could you tell us how place figures in your poetry?

The Ceredigion coastline, particularly the beach at Llanrhystud, is especially resonant for me. It's where I go to think. It's that sense of scale - relative scale. I mean, how can you not gain a salutary perspective on your place in the scheme of things when you consider that high tides are the oceans falling towards the moon.

I grew up in the Forest of Dean. All forests are strange places, but Dean is particularly unfathomable. Anyone who's been there will confirm that. As an older child, living in

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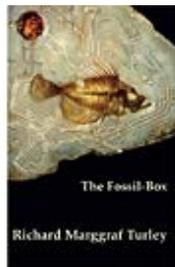
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Wales, visiting relatives in Blakeney, coming over from Monmouth, through Staunton, and down into the deep forest, nothing ever seemed to be in the same place twice.

Each journey was like visiting for the first time, but accompanied by a sense of being indescribably at home. Now I'm intrigued by the forest's layers and customs, by the people who lived and worked there over millennia - the Romans and free miners, Bully Boys and other rebel heroes like John Nurden, who destroyed illegal walls and pulled down enclosure fences.

There's also a hidden depth to the Forest of Dean in the form of its mines and scowles, those secretive, criss-crossing ways, many of them un-mapped, running beneath the roads and houses. For a poet this is pure gold. Writing about the forest has also been a way of making sense of the present, something that occupies most poets at some stage.



I have this idea of the past as impending - that our formative experiences have yet to work themselves out fully, and are still waiting ahead of us, somewhere. The first part of my new poetry collection, *The Fossil-Box* (Cinnamon 2007) called 'Vorrest' - a dialect word for

'forest' - explores this concept.

Do you think the Romantic literary take on nature and landscape is still important today?

It depends on what's meant by the Romantic 'take'. For a long time, the traditional view of Romantic nature poetry was that pieces focused on woods, hills and birds represented a retreat from the political world, a form of refuge.

We should remember, though, that when Keats was writing, Habeas Corpus had been suspended twice in living memory. Poets and their editors, if accused of sedition, could literally disappear in the night. Keats's own mentor, radical editor Leigh Hunt, was imprisoned for two years after insulting the Prince Regent in print.

So given that writing openly about political realities was a dangerous business in the Romantic period, we shouldn't assume that nature poems, even those that have achieved a hyper-canoncity like Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and Keats's ode 'To Autumn', are as 'innocent' as they seem.

Scholars including Marjorie Levinson and Nicholas Roe have argued forcefully that Romantic nature poetry often communicates a form of political dissent that was all the more trenchant for being disguised. My own research as a Romanticist in the Department of English, Aberystwyth University, also explores these fascinating issues.

Romantic poets writing around the time of the Napoleonic Wars struggled with tightening governmental control, increased surveillance and powerful sanctions. Some would say it was an era with clear parallels to our own. Poets regarded themselves as very much in the political front line. Today, political debate has largely shifted away from poetry - mainstream poetry, that is - towards prose forms.

By and large, it's blogs, newspaper and online articles that people turn to as the first port of call. Where Romantic poets rushed to set up oppositional networks of editors and presses, today's political conversations are as likely as not to be conducted in prose, using the internet. Yet for all the popularity of blogs and postboards, I think the condensed energy of a short poem, which makes its points subtly and at an angle, is an equally powerful, arguably a more forceful, means of commentary.

What did it mean to you to win the Keats-Shelley Prize?

The award is always hotly contested, so it was a genuine pleasure to be chosen as the tenth-anniversary winner. I was especially delighted to win a prize so closely associated with the memory of Keats. Of course, the £1000 prize money was a welcome bonus.

Was it difficult to write something new on the issue of slavery?

It took a long time before I could write anything on the theme at all. In fact, I almost missed the competition deadline. A more obvious approach to the subject might have been to 'inhabit' the voice of a slave, but I found the idea inescapably problematic.

In the end I decided to adopt the voice of a Romantic-period industrialist. Someone not unlike James Watt, member of the Lunar Society, and an abolitionist, but who nevertheless profited by selling his steam engines to the Caribbean plantations.

A letter survives in which Watt can be heard condoling with a plantation owner (and potential customer) whose business had been disrupted by a slave revolt. The same letter of commiseration ends by denouncing slavery as 'disgraceful to humanity'. I attempted to convey a sense of this double vision in my poem, 'Elisions'.

The poem explores a mind divided against itself. It shows a man unwilling to admit his complicity in the slave economy, but who is nevertheless given away by his language. It was a particularly challenging, not to mention discomfiting, poem to write. After all, most of us find it convenient to exile ourselves from the knowledge of how global economies operate.

What plans do you have for the future?

I'm not finished with the past yet. I'm currently working on a new collection of poems, which continues to meditate on landscape and formative experience. I'm also keen to write more socially inflected poems in the vein of 'Elisions'.

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