

Newdigate Prize, 2014
on the subject of 'Centrifuge'

The Centrifuge

"[A] fierce champion for the Moderns, ... in an engagement upon Parnassus, had vowed with his own hands to knock down two of the ancient chiefs who guarded a small pass on the superior rock, but, endeavouring to climb up, was cruelly obstructed by his own unhappy weight and tendency towards his centre, a quality to which those of the Modern party are extremely subject; for, being light-headed, they have, in speculation, a wonderful agility, and conceive nothing too high for them to mount, but, in reducing to practice, discover a mighty pressure about their posteriors and their heels." – Jonathan Swift, "A Full and True Account of the Battle Fought Last Friday Between the Ancient and the Modern Books in Saint James's Library."

"Bearing then this in mind, that intelligence is a self-development, not a quality supervening to a substance, we may abstract from all degree, and for the purpose of philosophic construction reduce it to kind, under the idea of an indestructible power with two opposite and counteracting forces, which by a metaphor borrowed from astronomy, we may call the centrifugal and centripetal forces. The intelligence in the one tends to objectize itself, and in the other to know itself in the object." – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria.

"Poetic form is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a steadying, allowing for the simultaneous gratification of whatever is centrifugal and whatever is centripetal in mind and body." – Seamus Heaney, "Crediting Poetry".

1. The Mechanism

"Fear not before the confusion outside of thee, but before the confusion in thee; strive for unity, but seek it not in uniformity; strive for repose, but not through equilibrium, not through a standstill of thy activity." – Friedrich Schiller, "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry", translated by William F. Wertz, Jr.

Since time is flying everywhere I look,
I take this opportunity to pause.
You, centrifuge, my futuristic book,
You heart of chrome, with ventricles of gauze,
I choose your spin to execute my chores,
To order what I cannot separate
And formalize the thoughts I cogitate.

You are my whirring, whirling wizard's cup,
My stern reminder, *carpe diem*-ator,
You brighten, gladden, buck, and giddy up,
You organise the work I must do later –
You are the schemer of your own creator!
You are my vessel, I your alchemist,
You conjure turn and counterturn and twist.

You mortar and I pestle what you cluster,
You muster and I master what you show.
You cut the mix, you cleave the huff and bluster,
You travel nowhere but you always go –
You hem your margins like La Rochefoucauld!
I tangent where you indicate the line
And follow where your filigrees entwine.

I spirograph around your inspiration,
I take the cues your curlicues suggest,
I draw the line you drop in conversation,
I siphon off what you have coalesced.
You are my desktop *mécanique céleste*,
My adumbrator and my in-the-groove –
You move in circuits and those circuits move.

So, centrifuge, my counsellor of state,
Enlarge the problems, show them to me plain:
Uncover all the ways of thinking straight
And lead me down discernment's dusty lane.
You are my second body, other brain!
I am Cincinnatus, you are the plough –
Let matter follow where we furrow now.

2. Time

"Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river." – Jorge Luis Borges, "A New Refutation of Time".

If what is due to happen is decided
By noughts and ones, or macromolecules,
I'm happy not to know. Life's many-sided!
The future rolls and rollicks and unspools -
I'll follow silver, but no golden, rules.
Tempus fugit? Oh, well let it go!
I would it were not, but it must be so.

Yes, time accelerates, the more you sweat.
Proportion is a nifty-fingered rogue
Who deals regression, leaves you with regret,
And turns your favourite fashion out-of-vogue.
He slurs a broad, unedifying brogue.
Say "time's a-flying"? But it is discrete!
It's wings are flightworthy, unlike my feet.

Or is its passage down to my perspective?
I like to think I'm looking from a train:
When peering forward, trees (this is subjective)
Appear to pass more slowly, to my brain,
Than when I spin around to watch them wane
Horizonwards. And so it is with days,
Which run more quickly when one resurveys.

The metaphors I have for time are spatial
And this conformity is not a fluke.
The house of time is structured and palatial
And passing through its walls, my mind's a spook -
A gobbly ghoul, a speaker of degook.
The time's a-changing? Unsurprisingly!
I wasted time and now doth time waste me.

The comedy of time is what sustains it.
The audience responses all agree
That time's a joker. Tragedy arraigns it
But teaches folks to live inventively
And dig the whirligig's tomfoolery.
So "*tempus fugit*"? Oh, well let it go!
I would it were not, but it must be so.

3. Self

"To seek what is 'logically required' for sameness of person under unprecedented circumstances is to suggest that words have some logical force beyond what our past needs have invested them with." – W.V. Quine, reviewing Milton K. Munitz., ed., Identity and Individuation, in The Journal of Philosophy, 1972.

Imagine I am spinning in a bottle,
Whipped and whirled until my parts divide.
Leave me there! Do not release the throttle
Until my particles have disallied.
You will agree, I think, that I have died?
But now imagine, friend, that you recorded
An image of the man you smorgasborded.

From that recording, you could make me new!
From soup, you could reaggregate my frame.
If organised correctly, from the stew
Of molecules, I could return the same!
But would that creature choose to bear my name?
Would guilt for what was lost keep him awake
And would he feel forever like a fake?

In that transmission, would I be transmuted?
And would things change for anyone but "me"?
Could I survive the process, comminuted
To be reconstituted perfectly?
I would be flesh again, for all to see,
So that could be a kind of resurrection –
Or, really, would it simply be reflection?

I hear that particles are all entangled
By quantum ties, to others far away.
Imagine if my entity were mangled –
Hidden out there in the *recherché*
Backwaters of the sky, a speck might sway!
Could such a web, attuned to rhyme with me,
Ensure, unchanged, my precious hope "to be"?

Consider, now, "The Rooster" by Miró:
Its undulant geometries attest
How form can govern meaning. All things flow
But I believe the orderly flow best.
What is a mind, when formless or at rest?
And is my brain more "of me" than my bones?
Is architecture patterning, or stones?

4. Weight and Lightness

"In practical life one will hardly find a person who, if he wants to travel to Berlin, gets off the train in Regensburg! In spiritual life, getting off the train in Regensburg is a rather usual thing." – Wassily Kandinsky, "On the Problem of Form".

Kandinsky was a centrifugal artist:
The slush of east and west, the circled world
Beyond which nothing, but the set-apart-est
Colours that are crumpled, cramped, and curled,
And fight to keep their secrets tightly furled –
A puzzling sea that girds the supernoval
Inventiveness of life into an oval.

Think of the balances in "Counter Weights",
Painted round the time of "Transverse Line":
A grumbling background hue recriminates
The coloured blocks that seem to shift and shine
As if to semaphore some secret sign.
They look like city blueprints from above
But, equally, might be a map of love.

With weight and lightness in proximity,
It's difficult to disentangle sense
Since sense becomes its own examinee.
Weight is the daring future perfect tense
That purposes to augur and condense,
While lightness is the mode of butterflies –
A mood to live in, hone, and improvise.

I side with lightness. Lightness always wins.
The eye is drawn to lightness first and last.
Weight's interruptive brunt vibrates and spins
But lightness can deflect its strongest blast.
Lightness is the sail that pulls the mast!
It is the force of jocular endeavour.
It is the only prize for being clever.

"Anyone whose goal is something higher,"
Quips Kundera, "must suffer vertigo."
But is it weight to which his thoughts aspire
Or lightness? Well, the first will group below
The latter, as the centrifuge can show –
And so this gadget clarifies my trouble:
Weight sinks, but lightness rises like a bubble.

5. The Unconscious

*"The centre that I cannot find
Is known to my Unconscious Mind;
I have no reason to despair
Because I am already there."
– W.H. Auden, "The Labyrinth".*

Jack Yeats I'd call a centripetalist.
Much like his brother, William, he was striving
To find the reason patternings exist
And reinvigorate them. What I'm driving
At with all this pictographic jiving
Can reckon Horace as an endorsee:
As painting is, so poetry can be.

The aquifer from which each draws its water
Is hidden in the shadows of the head.
It is the womb where Zeus conceived his daughter
Who parleyed with Apollo when the red
Rivers ran at Troy, where Paris fled.
It is a land of dream-catchers and kvetches,
It is a hunter's cave adorned with sketches.

Freud called it "the unconscious", which I guess is
As accurate a name for it as any –
This *ignis fatuus* that luminesces
To lure a thinker where the footing's fenny.
It is imagination's spinning jenny:
Its workers yearn for room, to roar and roam
Or rise like Aphrodite from the foam.

Thoughts come like actors on the conscious stage.
They chatter in the wings before a show –
"To die before the interval!" "I'd gauge
The punters well tonight." "Duck, do you know
The author? Why so heavy? What's his woe?"
And so their season dredges, drags, and drudges
Until, as one, they wipe off make-up's smudges

And cry, "Enough despair! Today we change
Our tragic buskin for the comic sock.
It's time to flaunt our full, unfettered range
And let the audience see how we rock.
We've had our fill of threnody and shock
And now it's time to scratch the record book –
To farce it up, mistake and be mistook!"

6. Sleep

"The righteous are those who can control their dreams." – John Fuller, "Logical Exercises".

The house Picasso stayed in by the sea
Surveys Antibes, across from Juan-les-Pins.
Up there the painter sharpened his *esprit*
And slowly found *ses images Africains*
Mingling with his *chèvres* and *sylvains*.
There he found new symbols for his dreams
And drew them into life in doodled reams.

Dreams! What are they? What defines a dream?
Dreams are strict, contracted universes
Composed on synapses. Their laws can seem
Less comprehensible than witches' curses,
More recondite than doubtful nonsense verses.
Dreams are our own and yet they are surprises:
They are the speckled shells of our surmises.

In daylight, dreams lurk on the edge of vision
Or saunter past, apparelled as a charmer.
It is their pride to jettison misprision
And lift the visor of our fancy's armour.
Dreams are the cerebellum's private drama!
A bluffer's answer to the double bluff,
Dreams prove imagination is enough.

Sleep's the feasthall where the dreamer sups,
Sleep blends the day's *bonne bouches* with its slops.
Sleep is the rich replenisher of cups.
Sleep is a terminus where nothing stops,
A Broadway hit that thrives and never flops!
Sleep is the mind's recalibrating sieve,
Sleep is the minx we've all been sleeping with.

Sleep makes this life a string of jamborees,
Each one engrossing, graced, and garlanded.
Sleep is the fortune teller's tannic lees,
The happy hypnotist inside my head,
The one who backs or beckons me to bed.
It is the clown, stunt-double, and the stooge.
Sleep is the mind's self-sorting centrifuge.

7. The Page

*"There is one knowledge which it is every man's duty and interest to acquire, namely, self-knowledge."
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Aids to Reflection.*

Say I'm the subject, and the object's me.
Better that than nature, men and women,
Astrophysics, truth, or gravity –
I need a subject large enough to swim in
And yet a cut of garment I'll look slim in.
I need a space to try my hand at order:
I need, before a reader, a recorder.

You, Page, my boundless partner, word-bound lover,
My space to swim and dive and paddle free,
You hold my note, you close me in your cover,
You are my as-it-was and my shall-be!
I am your supplicant, your refugee
And you, my soft, mind-melting carrycot,
My constant, flourishing forget-me-not.

You are my strange estranger and my strength,
My storyteller and my as-it-seems,
You stretch me through the future without length,
You flutter reams of colour through my dreams,
You sweep my winter frost into your streams –
My one reliability, my trust,
My galvanizer, guarding me from rust.

You, endless sinecure, my sin-forgiven,
My last sincerity, my carry-on,
The ruptures that your rivulets have driven
Between my body's sprung automaton
And thinking's evanescent eidolon
Have broken what I was, but kept the pieces –
You ward the Me my presence predeceases.

So I'm the "centre" I've been satelliting.
A force that pulls me one way is the "-fugal"
And "-petal" is the other, self-alighting.
Between them, I shall keep my lapses frugal,
Sing the margins, sound the paper's bugle!
I'm in the centrifuge of pen and ink –
It shows me what I am, and how I think.

8. Love

*"All thoughts, all passions, all delights,
Whatever stirs this mortal frame,
All are but ministers of Love,
And feed his sacred flame."
– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Love".*

Between my on-off amorous endeavours,
The centrifuge has moved but stayed the same.
It has outlived my ardentest "Forever!"s
And still it plays a fascinating game.
It bridles time and turns my temper tame.
It hands me levers, reins, and steering wheels.
It tells me what love gives and what it steals.

Two butterflies whip over where I sit,
Then double back as if to check on me.
I say, "You funny flappers, go a bit
On further down the garden and you'll see
A clematis I sowed when I was three –
How many periods of butvertime
Have passed between that planting and this rhyme?"

They flounce away with silent disbeliefs
That anyone could be so silly-minded.
They are the morning's lightest of motifs,
Disturbing petals recently unwinded
With instincts playful, fearless, and unbinded.
They seem like animations of some huge
Offcentring system like the centrifuge.

The centrifuge, which shows me what I'm thinking,
Caresses me asleep, shakes me awake,
Propels me soaring when I feel like sinking,
And turns my feet to flippers in the lake
Of thought, to splash and tidalwave and slake
The thirst I have for what this world conceals,
For what the space of thought alone reveals.

The summer falls in long festoons of heat.
My heart, I have been careless, loose, with you,
But when your rhythms tumble out of beat,
The centrifuge can set their levels true –
Since this is turning's purpose: to construe.
And so I pledge my tongue to song and dance.
I'll welcome what will come and call it chance.