

EXPLORING POETRY: AN INTRODUCTORY WORKSHOP with Marilyn Pietroni*

Last year, Wenlock Books hosted an evening of poetry reading with Steve Griffiths, the Welsh poet. It was well-received, thought provoking, and most of all, fun. It seemed a shame to leave it there... Talking it over afterwards, the idea emerged of doing something more, maybe a one-off workshop, maybe something more ongoing, something where people interested in poetry (but perhaps a bit scared of it) could explore taking their interest further and giving it some 'edge,' and where those who read poetry often could share their thinking with others.

The workshop has now begun! It met in March, starting in a convivial way with soup at 7pm, and setting to work between 7.30 and 10pm on two poems. The first was selected from Ruth Padel's book *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem*, which provides an expert critique, and the second is selected by a group member, prepared in advance, and discussed 'blind'. Participants read around the poet and poem, and discuss their thoughts when they meet.

Meeting quarterly on Friday evenings, the Poetry Workshop is an 'open group' which means it is possible for new people to attend on each occasion, with no commitment required to attend all meetings. **The next three dates are: June 6th, September 26th, and December 5th.**

Further dates may be arranged in view of the amount of interest. A joining fee of £5.00 towards the administrative costs of Wenlock Books is made at the first attendance only.

In March, the workshop discussed Moniza Alvi's *Map of India* from Ruth Padel's book and Gerard Manley Hopkins' *Pied Beauty*. Here is a summary of the discussion:

General Issues:

- What is poetry and what is verse and who says? (The OED has columns on the subject!)
- Is it necessary to like a poem in order to appreciate it fully?
- Does the biography, occasion, or sense of place, matter to the writing/reading of a poem? If so, how important is it?
- Is a poem an artifact which stands alone and can, or even should, be read divorced from its context? Or is it a specific biographical communication and the product of an era?
- Is it legitimate to have many different (personal) readings of one poem? If so, what are the implications? Do the readings co-exist simply, or can they be critically evaluated in some way, with one being privileged over another?
- What is the contribution of poetics? For example, does metre have to be understood?

Specific issues:

- Is Moniza Alvi's poem ' *Map of India*' (Padel' collection) verse or poetry?
 - Does it matter that Alvi's language is neither beautiful nor elaborate?
 - Is this poem/verse simply too short, too undeveloped?
 - Are there gender-specific elements in the poem? eg the forceful word 'prise' or the underlying and overlaid metaphors of mother earth/mother country/mother's body?
 - An interesting aspect of this poem is its movement between two dimensional, seemingly simple, description and three dimensional' deeper thinking?
- On *Pied Beauty* by G.M.Hopkins:**
- Is the rich language and metaphor a delight or too much 'all things bright and beautiful'?
 - How much does understanding Hopkins' 'Sprung Rhythm' matter to our reading? Are there traditional iambic pentameter lines here? Or does his rhythm reflect common speech (as he hoped it would) with references to the lilt of spoken Welsh and the long and short 'pointing' of sung psalms in the liturgy?
 - How much does knowledge of Hopkins' life need to determine our reading of the poem?
 - How much weight do we need to give to his religious belief in exploring his poetry?
 - Why did he compress unfamiliar images, sounds and words together? Does the compression help or hinder the poetry? Is it the essence of his style?

Marilyn Pietroni is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist with a special interest in the unconscious as it is expressed in poetry and literature. She has an MA in English Literature and has taught arts and literature students using poetry as a starting point. She is NOT an expert in poetry, rather someone who enjoys the mystery of unravelling a poem and appreciating language more deeply as a result.