

**BEHIND THE CURTAIN: TEACHING ALISTAIR CAMPBELL'S
"BURNING RUBBISH"**

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Burning Rubbish

On this wild, wet Sunday morning
I am burning the week's rubbish
In the oil drum by the red hut
Where the dogs graze in the spring grass
Under the ngaio tree. I hear
A thrush sing somewhere above me,
In the sodden foliage, a song
Out of key with what the storm wind
Has been singing all weekend.
I look up but I can see nothing
But plunging branches and a gull
Back-pedalling across the sky.
Above the whitened bay, pigeons
Hang in a shimmering curtain
As they check and turn in their flight
And vanish, beautiful as our love.
I would like to believe the thrush
When he asserts that there is room
In this world for the two of us,
But the wind is more persuasive,
And not even the rain can douse
The flames that are consuming
Our dreams with the week's rubbish.

Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, "Burning Rubbish," in *The Dark Lord of Savaiki: Collected Poems* (Christchurch: Hazard Press, 2005) pp. 93-94.

On this calm, clear Friday morning, I am reading "Burning Rubbish" to the seventy-plus undergraduates in a General Education Science course called "Communicating in a Knowledge Society." They eye me with curiosity and some

anxiety; most of them study Geography or Business or Engineering, not poetry. The lecturer has invited me here to teach a concept, any concept, that I consider to be of central importance to my discipline. Later in the semester, the students will be asked to describe and critique the communication techniques that I used to convey my message. Having already announced my topic – “How to Read a Poem” – I have warned that I do not intend to teach them how to read *this* poem; rather, I will outline a series of techniques that they can use to make sense of just about any literary text.

When I guest-lectured in this same course last semester, I brought along Emily Dickinson’s “The Spider Holds a Silver Ball,” a meaty, complex, highly existential poem that carried the students, in the space of half an hour’s discussion, from puzzled incomprehension to an animated debate about life, death, God and human endeavour. Campbell’s poem is much simpler and cleaner than Dickinson’s, easier to “get” on a first reading. I hope the students in today’s lecture will discover how even a seemingly straightforward and accessible poem can convey, through its use of concrete imagery, a remarkable emotional complexity. But what if the poem proves *too* obvious, too transparent? What if the students find nothing at all to say?

As I read aloud, I stumble over Campbell’s opening sentence, with its long string of prepositional phrases: “*In* the oil drum *by* the red hut / *Where* the grazing dogs graze *in* the spring grass / *Under* the ngaio tree.” Eventually, however, the poem picks up momentum, and I can feel the intensity building in my voice as I describe the thrush singing out of key with the storm wind, the gull back-peddalling across the sky, the shimmering, vanishing curtain of pigeons. Hope creeps into the poem – “I would like to believe . . . that there is room / In this world for the two of us” – only to be quashed by elemental certainties: “But the wind is more persuasive.” The poem ends where it began, with the weekly burning of the rubbish. But now something new has been added to the pile: along with other household refuse, the flames “are consuming / Our dreams.”

The students listen intently as I read; they have yet to see the poem in print. I pass out hard copies and ask them, in pairs, to come up with an abstract noun that they feel captures the emotional essence of the poem. After the usual hesitation – “What if I give the wrong answer?” – a few students raise their hands, and within a minute or so I have scribbled half a dozen abstractions on an overhead transparency:

Depression
Despair
Looking for Hope
Isolation
Anger
Wistfulness

Do any of these words actually occur in the poem, I ask? No. Indeed, does the poem contain a direct mention of *any* abstract emotion? The students scan the verses, line by line, until at last someone calls out triumphantly, “Love!” Yes, there it is, three-quarters of the way down the page: the most crucial and clichéd emotion in the human lexicon. Yet *Love* does not figure on the students’ list of words summing up the poem’s emotional content. When the poet finally puts a label on his feelings, he chooses an emotion that, like the vanishing pigeons, has already flown away.

Poets, I explain to the students, seldom express abstract ideas and emotions directly; they prefer to *show* rather than *tell* us how they feel. It would be tempting at this point to stray from my interactive agenda and start describing all the other ways in which poetic language can convey meaning: through sound effects and allusions and rhetoric and irony and pace and diction and tone. But today I have chosen to emphasise just one main point and to repeat that point over and over again. Poetry conveys abstract ideas and emotions through concrete language and imagery. Poetry conveys abstract ideas and emotions through concrete language and imagery. As human beings, we live in bodies; our most intense experiences of the world reach us through our senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. An effective image catches our attention and sticks in our minds because it appeals to our physicality: in Shakespeare’s words, “the poet’s pen . . . gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name.” I point to the title of Campbell’s poem and invite the students to list all the abstractions that they most readily associate with the verb *to burn* and its correlative noun, *fire*. This time, their answers come so thick and fast that my overhead marker struggles to keep up:

Passion
Desire
Pain
Anger
Warmth
Destruction
Consummation
Comfort
Energy

Enlightenment Purification

Already they can see, graphically delineated, how a single physical image can convey a whole range of complex and often contradictory emotions. Our job as readers, I tell them, is to figure out which of these abstractions apply to this particular poem, and why, and how.

We trawl the poem for other striking images: those that occur more than once in the poem, or that undergo interesting transformations, or that resonate with other images, or that are unusual enough to catch our attention. Next, I ask the students to identify major clusters of related images. Weather: they quickly establish that the poem's physical atmospherics – stormy wind, driving rain, plunging branches – convey a sense of emotional intensity, urgency and conflict. Temporal markers: someone points out that the weekend setting signifies an ending, but “morning” and “springtime” suggest new beginnings. Birds: what abstract ideas and emotions can we map onto the thrush, the gull, the pigeons? Yes, birds can symbolize Freedom, Lightness, Fragility, Music, New Beginnings – the students are getting good at this! – but such generic abstractions seem inadequate for explaining why so many feathered creatures flutter and sing their way through this poem about rubbish, stormy weather and a relationship gone wrong.

At this point I dip briefly into erudition and offer a two-minute potted literary history of birds in Western poetry, from Keats' Nightingale and Shelley's Skylark – emblems of romantic inspiration – to Thomas Hardy's distinctly unromantic Darkling Thrush, an ironic voice of hope in an otherwise desolate landscape:

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through

His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

(Thomas Hardy, "The Darkling Thrush")

Campbell's thrush, echoing Hardy's, slips fairly neatly and conventionally into English literature's long and venerable tradition of inspirational birds. The poem's other birds, however, provide more startling and original images. "A gull / Back-peddalling across the sky": we picture not only a seagull struggling against the force of the wind but also a bicyclist vainly trying to brake, a boxer dancing nimbly backwards to avoid a blow. Metaphorically, as one student points out, to "back-pedal" means to change one's mind, to go back on one's word. The gull's action therefore suggests, paradoxically, both an unwilling submission to an external force – who could possibly make progress against such a wind? – and a conscious, willed reversal of direction. The dualism of the image helps us recognise Campbell's anthropomorphic gull as an emblem of the poet's own struggle against contradictory emotions. The pigeons, by contrast, "check and turn in their flight" as though in full control of their own actions; they seem to represent more remote and external emotions. Mirroring the peaceful colour of the "whitened bay" – or is the water frothed by angry, wind-whipped whitecaps? – they "hang in a shimmering curtain" and then mysteriously vanish, "beautiful as our love." We discuss various meanings of "curtain": an opaque covering that obscures our vision; a divider between rooms; a stage command signifying the end of a performance. When the pigeons disappear, I ask, does the curtain lift or fall?

The students are buzzing with energy by now; hands are waving all over the lecture hall. But we have nearly run out of time. I ask them to write down a quick, compact, "Big Picture" description of what this poem is about: that is, what it's *really* about, besides the burning of rubbish on a Sunday morning. "It's about the end of a relationship," one student volunteers. Fine, but can we get more specific than that? How do we convey the emotional nuances we have just been discussing, the sense of conflict and contradiction conveyed in the poem's imagery: the weather, the burning rubbish, the birds? "It's about the anger you feel when a relationship ends," someone else suggests. Just anger? What about grief, confusion, regret? And how do we include in our reading the beautiful flight of the pigeons, the shimmering curtain, the explicit mention of love? Another student elaborates: "It's about the mixed emotions

that can occur at the end of a relationship: anger but also regret, sadness but also relief, passion but also a sense of calm.” Heads nod in agreement. As promised, the students, not I, have performed a thoughtful, persuasive close reading of the poem.

In the back of the room, another hand goes up. “I think it’s about the death of a loved one,” a young woman declares. “Why?” I ask, trying to mask my skepticism. “The thrush is singing out of key,” she replies. “The poet describes his love and his dreams, and the fact that the dreams are all gone now, like the pigeons. I think he’s burning the rubbish because he is trying to banish his grief.” Before I can muster a reply – how do I encourage the student’s perceptiveness and originality even while calling her conclusions into question? – the Science lecturer steps in and saves me. Our poetry hour has come to an end, he announces. The students applaud politely, and I gather up my things to leave.

The class has not really ended, however. Several students come up to thank me; a few want to keep discussing the poem. “I wish we’d spent more time talking about rubbish,” says one, without a trace of irony. Indeed, I had intended to return to the title image so we could tease out its contradictory implications. Rubbish has no value; we burn it because we consider it worthless. If the flames “are consuming / Our dreams with the week’s rubbish,” does that mean the lovers’ dreams *are* rubbish: trash, refuse, nonsense? Perhaps the poet is literally burning the lover’s belongings in a kind of funeral pyre? I am suddenly reminded of Sylvia Plath’s furious invective against her faithless husband in “Burning the Letters”: “I made a fire; being tired / Of the white fists of old / Letters and their death rattle” Another intertext? Like Campbell’s poem, Plath’s contains rain and trees and dogs, but arrayed in a much more vicious constellation: “Warm rain greases my hair, extinguishes nothing. / My veins glow like trees. / The dogs are tearing a fox”

At last, only the lecturer and I remain in the room. Once again I prepare to leave; but he, too, wants to keep talking about the poem. That last student who raised her hand, he tells me, illuminated a point that had been puzzling him throughout much of the hour: namely, the significance of the poem’s “shimmering curtain.” He had been reflecting on how the image invokes not only birds in flight but also curtains of rain (from the storm); curtains of smoke (from the fire); and just plain “curtains” (the end of the relationship). Not until his student mentioned the word *death*, however, did he recall the words of a Māori karakia, a prayer chanted in memory of lost loved ones:

Ērā o rātou kua ngaro ki te pō, kua haere ki tērā taha o te arai, haere atu ra, moe mai ra.

To those who are lost to the night, who have gone to the other side of the curtain: farewell, sleep well.

“Burning Rubbish” describes the death of a relationship, a love “lost to the night,” a lover who has flown to the other side of the curtain. Whether or not Campbell had this *karakia* in mind when he wrote the poem, the allusion shows how deftly his curtain image reinforces themes present elsewhere in the poem: loss, transition, safe passage, closure.

A week or two later, I encounter the lecturer again. He has not found closure, he tells me. This time, it is the poem’s opening sentence that has been bothering him. Those grazing dogs by the red hut: he feels certain he has seen them somewhere before. In a painting, perhaps? Or in a William Carlos Williams poem, near a red wheelbarrow and some white chickens? Eventually he puts the question to his class. The image of the dogs sticks in our mind, one student surmises, because there is something wrong with it: we expect to see cows and sheep grazing by a red barn, not dogs grazing by a red hut. Another student points out that dogs eat grass when they are sick; thus those prosaic opening lines in fact offer the poem’s very first indication that the world is “out of key.” Suddenly the students are talking about the poem again, prodding its nuances, interrogating its imagery, flushing out even more of the complex meanings and emotions that lie behind the opaque curtain of Campbell’s seemingly transparent language.