



Creative Writing

Ian McMillan and Repetition

Bill Greenwell

Ian McMillan is a poet, performer and presenter. He told me about the importance of repetition in his poetry and began by reading his poem, Bramwell Brontë is Re-incarnated as a Vest. He talked about where the idea for the poem came from.

Ian McMillan

Bramwell Brontë is Re-incarnated as a Vest.

I hang here like a ghost on the midnight line.
Frost hardens me.
Hardens the frocks I hang with.
Irony – to hang here on a night crashing with the loud moon
The moon only I can hear.
I hang here like a ghost on the midnight line.
If you stand by the garden shed
There
That side of the garden shed
And look at me from that angle,
Look towards the washing line from that angle,
I'm almost invisible behind the frocks.
I hang here like a ghost
The frost hardens
And dawn is dark years away.

I went to Longbank and I got off the train at Hebden Bridge, and I got the bus up to Heptonstall to go to Longbank and a vest blew off a washing line and hit me in the face. I was assaulted by this vest. I then took the vest back to the washing line and a woman shouted out 'Put that vest back' cos she thought I was stealing the vest. I just had this image of this vest that hit me in the face and then, the first line came to me, the title, Bramwell Brontë is Re-incarnated as a Vest came more or less straightaway after. So it came from that. And a lot of my poems comes from that, you know. They don't come from wanting to write something that means something. They come from something that's happened to me and then instantly, for no reason that I can fathom, a line appears in my head. Bramwell Brontë is Re-incarnated as a Vest. On its own, it's just a line, all right, leave that. Put it there. Put it somewhere, that's what I did. I wrote it, I left it for a bit. And then I thought, All right, Bramwell Brontë, interesting figure, you know, overshadowed by the sisters so I thought what if he'd come back as a vest and what if the rest of them came back as frocks and I imagined this same washing line where the vest had blown off and hit me in the face, that all this, that's where you get the line about, you can't see him – 'I am almost invisible behind the frocks'.

Bill Greenwell

In the famous painting, he's actually painted himself out, in fact, hasn't he?

Ian McMillan

That's right, so that's what it is, you can't see him in the painting, you can't see him in the thing. And he's kind of, his life isn't interesting somehow, although it is, you know, but we don't know much about him. When you go to the Brontë cottage, there's a bit of his drawing on the wall, you see him there, so this idea of almost being invisible. So what it is really, it's a kind of, it's a riff or it's a fugue or it's a kind of fantasia on the idea of somebody being reincarnated as a vest and even then, life not being good to them, you know, the idea that, All

right, I'm a vest. But then again, it's not going well for you, it's certainly not going well.
[Laughs]

Bill Greenwell

You just said that the poem's like a riff. It seems to me that almost all good poetry has got that element of repetition that riffs have, that images and words keep recurring in them.

Ian McMillan

I love riff. I love riff and repetition. They're great, I mean, poetry began by people rhyming and learning rhymes and learning lines that they repeated again and again, because that's how they get power, you know, you get power by repetition. You know, the reason I began to write was going to church on a Sunday and listening to those hymns, listen to Hills of the North, Rejoice, and the repetition of the lines, the repetition of the choruses at the end, the sounds being read out and the repetition of the language, yeah, repetition and riff are very important. And I think strict forms are great for that. Pantoums. Great. Let's repeat some stuff. Villanelles, get repeating.

Bill Greenwell

Are you a pantoum and villanelle writer or a fan?

Ian McMillan

I'm a fan, I'm a big fan. And I think that the best pantoum writers are people who take it seriously, and the best villanelle writers. But I like doing them as exercises. The older I get, the more I begin to understand the power and the pull of rhyme. As a young man, when I first started doing writing workshops round South Yorkshire in about 1982, it was a long time ago, I'd get these older people coming to my workshops who wrote the most beautiful rhyming verse and I'd say, 'Take that away and bring it back not rhyming'. Isn't that an arrogant thing, the arrogance of youth, but in that time, I thought rhyme was a bad thing, I thought it was for old people, what a terrible thing to say, I thought rhyme stopped you getting to the meaning of the poem, whereas in fact it doesn't, you know, Tony Harrison said 'Rhyme conveys meaning'. Rhyme helps you to think. I remember, again, these writers' workshops in South Yorkshire, I got into the pantoums, there was a fellow called Eddy, Steady Eddy, he'd come every week and he used to write rhyming verse and I'd try and get him not to rhyme. Then I said, 'All right, Eddy, have a go at a pantoum. Eddy became obsessed with them. He'd write half a dozen a week. Because that's what rhyme can do to you, that's what pantoums can do for you, and maybe, they weren't all great poems but what they're doing there is really getting your thought muscles going, getting your poetry muscles going, getting your rhyme muscles going.