

‘slowness & slow laps, say, around a center’ (Robert Creeley to Charles Olson)

In his interview with Glyn Pursglove for *Poetry Wales*, volume 19 no. 2, in 1983 Chris Torrance gave a picture of what it was like for him to come to Wales in 1970. He came ‘fresh and unknowing, with an enthusiasm unsullied by any prejudice or knowledge about Wales, unanticipating what was actually going to come.’ In his pursuit of history, geography and geology he recalled one particular midnight expedition which he came to see as his key into the ‘Matter of Wales’:

It was an expedition with Val and another close associate. We walked six miles across fairly wild country, especially across the limestone pavement which lies to the north of here, across swallow-holes, round the edge of bogs; when the moonlight went, alarming clattering sounds came up to us out of the night, which proved to be very friendly Welsh ponies. We intended to climb Van Nedd and watch the sunrise. We were very tired, since we’d done a hot day’s haymaking. As the light began to come back, we saw what looked like a huge horse up on the immediate skyline – a huge lump dancing, as it were, through a fatigue haze. As we got closer to this thing it turned out to be the stone Maen Madoc; twelve feet high, old-red-sandstone monolith, two or three feet wide, eighteen inches thick. A really substantial pillar with some debased latin lettering down the side.

Leaning against the standing stone, ‘flaked out’, he could hear the skylarks responding to the approaching dawn and ‘became conscious of a build-up of heat from the base of my spine that went right up my backbone’. The transfusion of energy and heat that ‘seemed to take over my whole body’ became a central aspect of what Torrance was to inherit from his move from Carshalton in Surrey to the Neath Valley of Glynmercher. His way of working as a poet was to ‘take a subject, immerse myself in it and read it through till I feel I’m grasping certain rock-hard concepts in the middle of all the evidence, and these are the concepts I can use to propel what I feel lyrically onto the paper.’

When I started writing to Chris Torrance in February 2004 it was to mention that I had the intention of writing an article on his poem ‘Aurochs’ which I had discovered in the ill-fated Paladin collection *the tempers of hazard* under the title ‘The Ice Ages’. I asked him whether this title referred to a

separate volume or a single poem and he replied that 'AUROCHS was 1st pub. in a short-lived mag from the Welsh Union of Writers called THE WORKS'. He also went on to talk a little about the world of Charles Olson:

I grabbed onto Olson mid-60's, pored over the poetics, the poems – "The Kingfishers", yes. I hoovered up most of the NAP 45-60 poets with enthusiasm, & I can point to bits of style & approach that I deliberately rehearsed & reworked in my early notebooks & into GREEN ORANGE PURPLE RED. I've kept at Olson ever since. I love to take the big books outside in the summer, read those wide poems out in the open where they belong.

Keeping this correspondence going I wrote back at the end of the month to ask Chris if he knew the Snyder poem 'Above Pate Valley' because I was sensing that his 'Aurochs' poem captured something that Snyder was aiming for, a sense of the intrusion of the past into the present, THEN becoming NOW. Snyder's early poem started

We finished clearing the last
Section of trail by noon,
High on the ridge-side
Two thousand feet above the creek...

and concluded

I followed my own
Trail here. Picked up the cold-drill,
Pick, singlejack, and sack
Of dynamite.
Ten thousand years.

I felt that that last line gave me a similar feeling to the time-scheme located in Chris's discovered 'huge bone' of the aurochs

Geologically this area is very active
even volatile twice-rejuvenated
the first

powered by the rhythmic shifting
of the Neath Valley Fault
which has caused the headwaters to be diverted

& secondly
by the ice
which left the area as
if only yesterday, leaving the bulldozer debris...

I asked him if the diary style of February to April 1987 had been an incorporation of notebook jottings into the fabric of the poem and had the poem itself been written some time after the first discovery of the bones of the auroch. On May 2nd he wrote back:

This business about space – first trigger for me at age 9 or thereabouts. Thor Heyerdahl's Kon Tiki book. & by my early fascination with geology. Jazz also being about making space inside (apparently) regular time. Then coming to Wales – discovering the stones – investigating the glorious burst of books in the 70's exploring Stonehenge, Avebury, pyramids; Bailey's "The Sea Kings & the Titans", I think it was called – the Pacific wanderers with their star maps & current memories
all this plus continuous reading of all those guys, Olson, Snyder, Kerouac of course – Ginsberg – built up an appreciation of how much more we are a humankind of extraordinary perception & vision. The big bone of the alleged Aurochs opened up the flow for that bit of writing. I was rushing stuff down into the diary as it happened. Jill was visiting that particular weekend when we probed around a bit more to find the girdle of the animal. With a longer poem like that bits tend to keep arriving long after the main body has formed up. I had to manipulate the various sections quite a lot before it seemed settled.

In his contribution to that *Poetry Wales* issue which had contained the Glyn Pursglove interview Greg Hill commented upon Chris Torrance's style as being 'like a personal diary in which mundane detail of daily events is mixed with an occasional sudden clarity of elated moments or sunlit precision of detailed description'. In 'Aurochs' the diary record is precise:

of itinerant arrows? Did an infant
scramble at your side?
 were you chased
 far out

over shallow lakes
from bank to bank
islet to islet
until trapped in sinking sands,
rock flour mud?
did the giant corvine
 pluck out your eyes?
the black kite
 feast upon your flesh?
while you slowly sank
in slower struggles
 into the years
into this room

The autumn of 2004 presented skies that seemed to me to belong to the eighteenth-century and I wrote to Chris to send him a copy of Charles Tomlinson's poem 'At Holwell Farm' that had been included in the volume *Seeing is Believing* in 1960. In the poem Tomlinson quoted from a letter sent by Keats to J.H. Reynolds on September 21st 1819, some hours before he wrote 'To Autumn':

How beautiful the season is now – How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather – Dian skies – I never lik'd stubble fields so much as now – Aye better than the chilly green of the spring.

On Saturday 6th November Chris wrote back:

Thanks for your article, lovely surprise through the post...
 ...I'm so glad you focused .
on AUROCHS. That poem burned in like a hairy comet! & the ingrained habits of eternal record netted the "product". Remembering writing it – it

was a big thrill, arriving – working it – thanks anyway, for the attention, there.

“temperate sharpness” – yes – but, astonishingly, no frost here, past Guy Fawkes – not a single ice crystal located. Sept 11th 1970 first frost, our first year here...you could say we’ve gained 6 or 7 frostfree weeks in the autumn since then. It was a fabulous growing season here this year, at 640 feet, continuously warm despite rains late summer. Good crops, banks of flowers & herbs. Whatever the cause the growing season has been lengthening noticeably since the 1980’s. I saw a large, greyish dragonfly today, Sat Nov 6 – never seen that before, at such a late date.

4 weeks ago 8 hr jam session with Ric Hool, & a bottle of Welsh whiskey, which is made at the Penderyn Distillery, about 5 crow miles from here. A delicious smokey, slightly honey aroma, it punches its way down the thorax with each swallow, liquid fire fanning out. At 40 proof it reaches parts you didn’t know you had. Look out for it: its expensive, but unforgettable...

In 2006 I sent Chris an article I had written on Robert Duncan for the magazine *Tears in the Fence* and in October, another autumn, he wrote back:

You are considering precisely the poem I read again & again in that spring & summer of 1966, when I was making the first breakthru. Duncan’s THE OPENING OF THE FIELD shakes the whole body still...Good summer kept me outside most of the time...exciting encounters with goshawks...& Diane di Prima’s LOBA...great growing season, crops, herbs, insects, butterflies, flowers, lizards...usual lively sessions with Ric...now real autumn wetness has set in & I’m back at the typer at last

best

Chris