

In Relation: On Poetic Choice, Intention and Agency

Eleanor Rees

To find the beginning, the moment when the choice was made, is to place events in sequence to enable a prose text to read well, to make sense. Yet reality is not linear, and neither is poetry. Matter is complex, divergent and alive. The starting point for thought can never be solely the human subject, or *my* situation in the world. We must start with an appraisal of a subjectivity *in relation* to the more-than-human world. Poetry is an imaginative relation, an invocation of animate energy. Lyric poetry's construct of an 'I' on the page creates a position from which to see the world within the flows, and from which to respond, yet as it is a poem, a work of art, a reader or listener can also recognise the contingency of the voice and the temporality of the articulation. Lyric voice expresses a realism and stoicism in relation to the impermanence of matter and enacts a reaching over to the edge of human perception, desiring to become what the human subject only will become at a loss, yet we recognise in life as a living vitality.

Eleanor Rees lives on the Wirral peninsula on Merseyside, UK. She is a poet, senior lecturer in Creative Writing at Liverpool Hope University, has extensively worked as a poet in communities with The Windows Project, and regularly gives public readings at festivals and literary events. In her PhD thesis 'Making Connections: The Work of the Local Poet' (Exeter, 2014) she explored the relationship between the poet, place, and community.

Her poetry collections include *Portents and Portals: New and Selected Poems* (Guillemot Press, 2024), *Tam Lin of the Winter Park* (Guillemot Press, 2022), *The Well at Winter Solstice* (Salt, 2019, Northern Writers' Award 2018), *Blood Child* (Pavilion, 2015), *Eliza and the Bear* (Salt, 2009) and *Andraste's Hair* (Salt, 2007, shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, UK, and the Irish Glen Dimplex New Writers' Award). A collection of essays *Eyes in the Wood: Encounters with Poiesis* (collected theoretical and lyric essays) is forthcoming from Broken Sleep, 2025. Her pamphlet collection *Feeding Fire* (Spout, 2001) received an Eric Gregory Award in 2002. Selections of Eleanor's poems have been translated and published in pamphlets and anthologies in French, Spanish, German, Lithuanian, Slovak and Romanian.

My mode of thought in this essay aims to resonate with ideas, not define them. I write a lyric voice to explore how concepts interweave within a subjectivity in relation to the experience of writing poetry. It is this space that is the focus of my interest, the meeting point which is always a process of alteration. The poetics I sketch here offers no split between mind and matter in my thinking, and this intention requires a conception of time and space which resists easy articulation in lyric prose. Yet there are also multiple perspectives at play in any cultural moment and it is to these that I look towards to conceptualise further how the poems choose me, rather than me, them. Here, I will sketch out why this is the case for my poetry in relation to a poetics informed by posthuman and new materialist philosophy, reflecting on how I came to choose the poems I read at *Poems from Port Cities: Ports as Portals, liminal encounters, and infrastructure space. A collaboration of Ó Bhéal and POEPOLIT II, October 2022*. The summer and autumn of 2022 is where I shall start though this timeframe is also not the true beginning, but it will help form the narrative I need to convey my thoughts.



Dr Cornelia Gräbner invites me to meet at a coffee shop in Liverpool to develop ideas for an event with Ó Bhéal in Cork Ireland. We met through the poetry scene in Liverpool, and we meet in Lark Lane in the south of the city, a 'trendy' street with independent shops, cafes and bars. We chat broadly, thinking around the themes of poetry, place, politics and from the discussion arises the theme of the port as a liminal space and poems as similar liminal crossing-points. Our human conversation does feel like a beginning, and indeed the themes we explore in conversation become more coherent in the process of communication. Yet, I can only offer new ideas into the conversation because of the poems I have recently written, the relations I'd explored between mind and landscape and meanings found there. Are these poems then thinking with me? I am always starting from my practice as a poet understood as not denoting an individual human subjectivity but a moment of crossing over and into the more-than-human. When the poet is understood as a mediator, a conduit between energies, then it is also possible to think of poems as having an agency, acting back into the conscious mind of the poet, and also energetically into the environment the thought resonates within, and also within the experience of readers and listeners. Through writing poetry, a poet moves energy within the environment. These traces of history, time and space, circle and loop into the coffee shop

as we speak, folding in and away, noticing me as I breath them in, feeling their pulse as an idea is spoken aloud, partly mine, partly other.

Prior to these conversations in the summer of 2022, I'd published *Tam Lin of the Winter Park* (Guillemot Press, 2022), written amongst the landscape of Sudley Park and during the covid lockdowns in 2020. These poems are also a response to poems in *The Well at Winter Solstice* (Salt, 2019) and take forward imaginative knowledge discovered in writing those poems. The poem is an imagining which is a real phenomenon, a crossing point in a flow of material energy. A poem is not a representation of the world, or indeed offering any notion of stable identity. As the poet I facilitate this crossing using literary skills learnt from poetic tradition and regular practice. In the full sense of the word, a poet *articulates* meanings by moving one form of perception into another.

Cultural Crossings

With my eyes closed and sung alongside voices heard in translation, I write poetry in English inflected by Welsh language traditions. It's a silent aspect of my ancestry and a skyline always on the horizon line, visible from Liverpool and the Wirral peninsula, the urban streets built by Welsh builders, communities which used to speak Cymraeg. In Welsh language poetry bards were able to communicate between worlds; the otherworld is always present in this one. The patterns and musical forms of poetry produce a meditative or mindful state of perception which allows the poet to speak both within and beyond the human. I have reimagined this idea from somewhere in this city, or misremembered it as a thought form, a resonance from my distant heritage but it resonates with my experience of writing poems across the years. I relish the experience of writing poetry for the shaping and patterning, as I lose myself in those moments, inside syntax, inside the harmony (cynganedd) of the sound of words. The poet crosses into the other realm (Annwn) (which is in this realm, meaning the poet accesses a conceptual world concurrent with this one) and produces meaning, themes, other ways of seeing which has a power, and is a kind of magic, but this is all achieved through the hypnotic effects of 'musical' patterning in language, of arranging words to emphasise their abstract semantic, yet material quality. In doing this, a poet can access other aspects of the material world, create new spaces within it, into which energy can swell and disperse.

Technological Distortions

The poetry reading is to be online, so I read poems from my living room in Liverpool, in the rented flat I lived in at the time. To do this well (I hope) I watch the computer screen intently imagining myself in the hall in Cork, Ireland, where I am projected as light onto a bare white wall. I can imagine it now as I write this prose text months later; I feel I have been to Cork in-person though only as a bird or a giant and I've looked down at the hall from a high window. My sense of space is non-human and tangential. I can describe the room in detail due to how hard I had to concentrate to understand the dimensions of the experience. I also googled the venue in advance to estimate who might be there in the audience and researched the other types of literary events which were being held as part of the festival. I need this contextual information to be able to read poems into the space in a meaningful way, to judge tone and voice as I might do if I had been standing at the microphone. I need to be able to project a spatial awareness onto the room. The subjectivity produced in the experience is dispersed, relying on imagination to see from multiple angles so I can inhabit the event as a coherent subject, and not become bewildered by the range of dimensions I am being asked to operate within.

Making Decisions

I selected poems which overtly connect to the landscape of Liverpool, and chose those which seem most inhabited by place, and less fluid or abstract maybe (as this can be harder to connect with audiences perhaps in a zoom setting; I was looking for 'transnational' themes). The context of the event formed my critical, literary judgement. I deliberately included a poem which suggested the history of slavery in relation to Liverpool, a poem I was less certain about as a written poem, but which received an applause as the theme was recognisable to the Cork poetry audience for the politics of decolonisation are global. Poems which made clear pictures for the reader and offered an understandable sense of location also seemed important given the highly abstract context of the zoom reading. I felt a need to compensate for the loss of embodiment. I didn't want to confuse the audience as there was a lot to 'read' or 'parse' in the situation, given that the poet was only present as light and sound, rather than an embodied fleshy creature, breathing and carrying its human energy, stood a metre or so from the audience with a microphone.

So, 'realness' became a concern as I selected from my books. I didn't read 'Old House', for example as it is a poem which sends Sudley House flying through the air! I looked for ways to settle the listener, either in careful evocation of place, or a lyric voice which would hold an aural space rather than disrupt it. These are decisions based on poetic technique, how the poem is constructed through literary devices and speaks to expectations in contemporary poetry, rather than conceptual choices based on a desire to say something from myself to others. The poems choose, as does the medium of communication, and the locations from which they began. I sculpt the material to allow these places, histories, creatures to resonate within the sphere of human cultural life. The poet is the portal, a mediator, through which matter transforms from more-than-human to human.

The poems I read are poems of place which emerged in situ (with subsequent drafting) from the landscape around my previous home in south Liverpool. I spent much time there listening to this environment and walking through, and the poems seem to offer a layered sense of this place. Poems are emergent spaces which have a politics, but I am careful not to over attribute too much to these fledgling spaces as this action would counteract any of their alterity as new expressions of space and time. We need to not judge or know the world too quickly. We need to give it space to exist. Just by being 'otherworldly', or offering moments into which the more-than-human can exist, the poems respond to the experience of a port city, or in this case the Victorian suburbs which were built as a response to the prosperity of capitalist extraction, slavery, control of the tidal pool to create the dock, the labour of immigrants from the empire, the British working class, all premised on an ontological distinction between human and non-human, on categories which valorised the already powerful and demoted the more-than-human to silent, non-communicative inanimate void.

Poetry, through its form and music, pattern and sound, asks us to recognise and listen, speaking from its own agency which is the agency of the world, to value that which is more-than-human not just as finance or as resource, but as potential, as energy, as pattern, a resonance in a pool, a seed taking in sand; as manifestation of the living energy of the world; as energetic *shimmer* so we know to keep imagining new spaces to heal the boundaries of our stressed bodies and ecological systems so equilibrium can be restored and life can thrive.

Works Cited

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