

Sestina **for two voices**

Pœtry

Sally Purcell

Music

Michael Maxwell Steer

June 2012

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At one of Paul Quarrie's excellent suppers the conversation turned to classical poetry, and he referred to translations made by his Oxford contemporary Sally Purcell, producing her collected works – from which I saw that Sally was a descendant of Henry's less famous brother Daniel, and that she died of a rare brain disease in 1998, aged just 53. Her life story was in some ways an unhappy one. She remained in Oxford after graduating, and while she published six volumes of poetry, subsisted for the most part by menial employment.

I was immediately entranced by the delicate precision of the language and her refined sensibility. Ordering a copy for myself I enjoyed reading a couple of pages each night before falling asleep. The language was so dense and mysterious and rich, that it was like nodding off in a perfumed room. My thoughts turned to setting some of the verse, and the first poem to grab me was this *Sestina for two voices*. There are two sestinas in Purcell's Collected Works, one a translation of Petrarca, which are among the most fully-achieved examples of a complex and demanding form that is too often a sterile exercise in wordplay.

Michael Maxwell Steer

14/11/12

– We slip around the corner of your mind's eye,
Creatures of lonely twilight between hills,
We are never unmistakably seen;
If living men have strayed on to our path,
Our visitation is like that of love
And follows them into their deepest dreams.

Where light and shadow variegates the dream,
Leaves of magic trees have dazzled your eye
With every brightness that waits upon love,
Inward-glowing light of enchanted hills,
By which you recognise the coiling path
Which you have always known but never seen.

Then how to understand what you have seen,
Never sure you have glimpsed outside a dream,
Where what you cannot see is the true path?
Is it full clarity within your eye,
Is it the view from frightening hills,
The joy of sight at last made clear by love?

– When this light is the beginning of love
It is like nothing I have ever seen;
It is no view from any frightening hills,

It is nothing I have known in a dream,
But it overmasters my dazzled eye,
Commands by knowledge of an unknown path.

I feel is that there is darkness on this path,
And I can guess the darkness of love;
There will be need for me to trust an eye
Familiar with things I have not seen;
There will be times I hesitate to dream
And times when I am frightened of the hills.

I shall not be rejected by the Hills
Although I'm many times will miss their behalf;
My journey will take me into that dream
Because my guide will always be my love;
I give myself to what I have not seen
Because all knowledge comes from the eye.

Gold light streams down hills in Apollo's path;
Labyrinths of dream lead at last to love;
And fullness is seen by one perfect eye.

From *Fossil Unicorn* 1997

Sestina for two voices

Words Sally Purcell 1997

Music Michael Maxwell Steer (22-25/6/2012)

Recitative-like at first, but slowly gathering rhythm

The musical score is written for two voices and piano accompaniment. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 1-6) features a vocal line with lyrics 'Creat- ures of lone- ly' and a piano accompaniment with a melody starting on measure 2. The second system (measures 7-12) features a vocal line with lyrics 'twi- light be- tween the hills,' and a piano accompaniment with a melody starting on measure 10. The third system (measures 13-18) features a vocal line with lyrics 'We are nev- er un- mis- tak- a- bly' and a piano accompaniment with a melody starting on measure 16. The score includes various musical notations such as treble and bass clefs, time signatures (2/4, 3/4, 4/4), dynamics (mf, mp, pp), and articulation marks (accents, slurs). The piano part includes a tempo marking of 86 and a performance instruction 'colla voce'.

mp **mf** **pp sempre** **colla voce** **=86**

1 Creat- ures of lone- ly

8 We slip round the cor- ner of your mind's eye,

7 twi- light be- tween the hills,

We are nev- er un- mis- tak- a- bly

13

If liv- ing men have strayed on- to our path,

8 seen;

18

Our vis- i- ta- tion is like that of love

8 And foll- ows

24

28

Where light &

8 them in- to their deep- est dreams.

30

shad- ow var ie- gate the dream,

Leaves of mag- ic trees have

35

dazz- led your eye With ev' ry bright- ness that waits up-

p leggis

40

In- ward- glow- ing light of en- chant- ed

on love,

freely

46

hills, Which you have

poco cresc

By which you have re- cog- nised the coil- ing path?

poco cresc

mf

52

al- ways known but nev- er seen.

Rhythmically stricter

Then how to un- der stand

p

57

Nev- er sure

what you have seen ...

mp *mf* *p* *fp*

63 *pp* *p*

you have glimpsed out- side a dream,

quasi f *3* *3*

Where what you can- not

mp sempre *p* *mf intenso*

una *tre*

68

Is it full clar- i- ty with- in your eye,

3

see is the true path?

f

74

Is it the view from fright' ning

mf *f* *marcato*

79

hills, The joy of life at last made

f

energico

83

clear by love?

85 *f*

When this light is the be-

fp

88

ginn- ing of love It is like no- thing I have ev- er seen;

ff

94

mf 3 3 *sfz*

It is no view from an- y fright' ning hills,

mf *mp*

100 **animando**

It is no- thing I have known in a

f

animando

f

senza ped 8va bassa con ped

105 =101

dream, Comm- ands by

ff

But it ov- er mast- ers my daz- led eye,

sfz

senza ped 8va bassa con ped

111 3 114

know- ledge of an un- known path.

p *ff*

f

115 3 3

feel that there is dark- ness on this

feel that there is dark- ness on this

fp *f*

119 3 3

path, And I can guess the dark-

path, And I can guess the

mf *mf*

murmurando mp *8va*

Led. *Led.* *Led.*

123

ness- es of love; And I can

dark- ness- es of love; And I can

8va

3

f

f+

Leo.

127

guess the dark- ness- es of love;

guess the dark- ness- es of love;

ff

Leo.

131

There will be need to trust an eye Fam- il- i-

There will be need to trust an eye Fam- il- iar with

mf cr molto

136 *mf* *cr* *>*

ar with things I have not seen; There will be times I

things I have not seen; There will be times I

mf *cr*

mf *cr*

140 *trattenuto* *f* *3* *3* *dim*

hes- i- tate to dream And times when I am fright- ened

hes- i- tate to dream And times when I am fright- ened

trattenuto *f* *3* *3* *dim*

trattenuto

146 *ff* *Molto energico* *ff* *3* *3* *3* *3*

of the hills. I shall not

of the hills. I shall not

ff *Molto energico* *ff* *3* *3* *3* *3*

ff *Molto energico*

151

be re-ject- ed by those hills

be re-ject- ed by those hills

155

Al- tho I man- y times will miss their path

Al- tho I man- y times will miss their path

160

My

My

Led.

163

jour- ey will take me to that

8 jour- ey will take me to that

Led. * *Led.* *

167

dream Be- cause

8 dream Be- cause

mf

8va

171

my guide will al- ways be

8 my guide will al- ways be

ff

175

my

my

ff

179

love;

I give my- self to

love;

I give my- self to

f

183

what I have not seen

what I have not seen

Più largo

Più largo

Più largo

Led. *

186

Be- cause not all we know comes

Be- cause not all we know comes

Red.

* 3 3 3

189

from the eye.

from the eye.

molto rit

mf cr

molto rit

3 3

$\text{♩} = 86$ 16va ...!

192

193 **Soave**

mf

Gold

mf

Gold

pp

molto dim

$\text{♩} = 86$ **Soave**

3 3 3

196

light streams down

light streams down

199

hills in Ap- oll- o's path;

hills in Ap- oll- o's

203

path;

sp *pp*

207 *dolciss* 208

Lab- y- rinths of dream lead

Lab- y- rinths of dream

dolciss

sempre legg

212

at last to love And

lead at last to love

216

full- ness is seen

And full- ness is

220

by on- ly one eye.

seen by on- ly one eye.

225

pp

8va

2/7/12