

In the Place of the Past: John Cale's *Dark Days* – *Dyddiau Du*

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You're working in the dark, or I am anyway... – John Cale

It begins with water. The slow drip from a hose into a bath that will later appear in the final movement of the work as that in which Cale himself is immersed, gasping for breath, his struggle for air, amidst repeated immersions, interrupted by noisy bursts of broken transmission. Water and memory are bound together – if not in any simple logic of physical connection, then in the deeper logic of the unconscious, the logic of symbol, of metaphor, of magic and of mystery. In Hades, it is two rivers, Lethe and Mnemosyne, whose waters have the power to wipe away one's memories or to restore and sustain them, and it is also water that, in many mythologies, including that of Celtic Wales, marks off the realm of the dead from that of the living. If memory is tied to water, then it is also water that marks the boundary between realms – not only the living and the dead, but the present and the past, the known and the unknown, the mundane and the magical. *Dark Days* begins with water, not only as an ominous allusion to the torturous scene with which the work ends, but perhaps also as a mark of the entry into the work as an entry into a strange and different realm – even though it is also a realm rooted in the everyday, the ordinary, the present.

Yet although it may indeed be said to involve a movement 'between' realms, the movement that occurs here is not a movement that takes us away from the embodied materiality of the world around us, but instead returns us to that world. It is here, between these walls and in this room, among these hills and under this sky, through these actions and this body, that our memories, our very selves, are shaped, grow, and are given shelter. We are not other than the memories that make us, and our memories are not to be found other than in the concrete singularity of the places in which our lives are lived. It is here that we encounter ourselves and others. It is here that our lives take form.

'We are such stuff as dreams are made on', says Shakespeare's Prospero (*The Tempest*, Act IV, Scene I), and what stuff is that if not memory itself, so that memory itself may appear as a dream, and a dream may take the form of a memory. But the memory that appears here is not the memory of evanescent fancy or vague rumination, but the memory given *in flesh*, memory that takes the form of the turn of a railing, the edge of a door, the peel of paint, the light

suffused through window, a distant view, a piano, the emptiness of a room, a shard of slate, the shine of snow, the effort of a climb. To return to memory, to

the stuff of dreams (and not all dreams are happy), is to return to the reality of our own existence.

In the dark space of Cale's installation, we find ourselves in an enclosed space, a space haunted by sound, and sometimes by silence, a space lit only by the projection of images onto multiple screens. Without seating, but able to move within that space, it is as if we are held within the solitary space of a life, a life given in the darkness of recollection, a life rendered opaque in its illuminated projection. In this space, a space that might otherwise appear as mundane and empty (blankly walled, devoid of objects, without sign or symbol), there is a weaving of spells, a conjuring of spirits, an invoking of shadows. The shades that are brought forth, however, are the very shades of memory itself; the spirits are those of a past, as well as a place, of a life – but also of a childhood, of a family, of a community, of a culture. It is not a conjuration that aims at making what is gone real once more, for that would be to misunderstand the very relation to the past, to memory, to the recollection of life and world that is at issue here. Instead, the magic that is performed, the act of invocation, remains always of what can only ever appear as shade, spirit, remembrance, and that, as such, can only appear in and through the materiality, the immediacy, of what remains – the past is thus brought to appearance in the actuality of the present, as recollection occurs through the felt reality of present experience.

As a composition in sight and sound 'performed' or 'projected' in a specific site, so *Dark Days* might well be described, in conventional curatorial terms, as a 'mixed media installation'. In fact, it is perhaps better characterised as a symphonic work comprising three main movements together with a prelude and a coda (the second already invoked in the first). In its symphonic character it plays image against sound, creating both dissonance and harmony; a unity of seeming fragments; a unity that bears witness to its own uncertainty, its own contradictions.

The first movement locates us in a fixed position, able to see one edge of a room and part of a hallway, a piano against a wall, sunlit window beyond. Here is the preliminary exposition, a theme appears, a place, but a place of ambiguous presence, a place in which a figure comes, first ghostly, then real, in which music plays, but is then refused (or perhaps itself refuses) – the figure cannot play, but only flexes his hands, appears as if about to begin, then stops, rises, walks away.

While the first movement is largely static, at least in its point of view, the point of view of the second movement is both fixed and mobile, juxtaposing Cale's own close-up image, seen through a the resolute focus of a handheld

lens, with the slow steady and often panoramic shift of view across mountain and rock, snow and sky. Body and place are here seen in close engagement even though the mountainous landscape that is also present stands silent and aloof. This is a landscape that, like all landscapes, has its own memories. It is a landscape that is both remembered and part of the repository of memory for a people and a place. The landscape is that of Snowdonia – the archetypal landscape, one might say, of Wales. To walk across this landscape is to walk across memory given in stone and earth; given the role of this landscape in the memory of a people, one might say that to walk across it is akin to walking, as Cale says in another context, “across the bones of ancients”. Yet this landscape encompasses not only the familiar Welsh vistas of mountain and valley that one might find in any tourist brochure, but also something no less a part of that Welsh landscape, a disused quarry, a place where the landscape itself is mined for its usefulness, a place of toil and labour.

The figure whose face we see as he works to climb the steep stairway cut in the rock might, in such a place, be thought to be engaged in some act of pilgrimage or penance. Yet even if there is something of the penitential here, it is surely a rather different act that takes precedence. What we see is an act of physical exertion and endurance – an act of *assertion*. As if it had itself been overlooked, forgotten, ignored, the climber’s own bodily existence is asserted and reclaimed. Juxtaposed with the images that succeed and precede it, such bodily assertion and reclamation appears as a means to the assertion and reclamation of memory, of self and world – a reclamation of one’s very life – a reclamation that is achieved through the reality of physical effort and endurance. It is, indeed, through our bodily engagement that we are first in the world – our being in the world is thus a bodily being, even though it is not *only* bodily, it is given in movement, even though it also incorporates a form of repose. Moreover, the world itself is given first in the ‘bodily’ materiality of its presence – in earth and stone, in sky and rain, in flesh and blood, in the felt and the lived. Our belonging to the world is a belonging that comes from our embeddedness in the very materiality of things – our embeddedness in what we may call, following the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the very *flesh* of the world.

If *Dark Days* takes the form of a symphonic work, then it also incorporates within it other musical forms or analogues of such forms: the second movement is a rhythmic in character, a *rondo*, whose rhythm is set by the patterns of breath and step – a rhythm that is itself brought about by the engagement of body with landscape, with ground, slope, and surface. In this respect, the materiality of things, of self and world, is not a matter of any merely static ‘presence’. Such materiality is given in the movement that resides within it and to which it gives rise – so stone is not merely that which

stands before us possessed of certain presented qualities, but is rather an active presence that resists, enables, supports and obstructs. It is this active presence that gives a power and meaning to the world, and to the things within it; that gives a power and meaning to our own felt existence; that gives a power and meaning to memory, and so also to the past and the present, as belonging, not merely to some private internality, but to the very world that we find around us – a world whose opacity and richness defies our attempts at any simple understanding or resolution, a world whose heights we constantly strive to climb, but can never surmount.

The third movement develops and draws together all of these themes – of place, memory, opacity, loss, the nature of the past, the role of the body, the reclamation of self. Here is a slow but steady play of elements, akin to a slow *waltz*, as we find ourselves in a house, empty, stripped, and yet still full with presence, the camera moving slowly across surfaces and into corners, the movement so slow as to be almost unnoticed. We see a window that looks out to a landscape beyond – one place enclosed within this, but also opening out beyond it, like a memory held within a memory, a world within a world, a world enclosing a world. The house lightens and darkens with the passage of night, from dusk to the coming of dawn. It is a house of empty spaces, of silences, of stripped appearances, and yet none of those silences is without speech, none of the spaces are without presence, every appearance retains a past as well as present reality.

Dark Days does not take the form merely of a succession of images, as in a documentary film or a visual autobiography. Instead, images are played against and with one another (as with sound) through both juxtaposition and superposition. In this respect, the experience of *Dark Days* is like the experience of both time and space – like the experience of a place, or, indeed, of a lived life – in that the where and the when of it is both singular and multiple, part of a single complex intertwined, emplaced event. The temporal-spatial *between* in which the audience finds themselves – between the screens onto which the images are projected, between the speakers from which sounds enter into space, between the enclosing walls and in the darkness so held – is a between that does not allow of resolution into a single scene or perspective. Even the first movement of the piece shows us not one, but two views, each view a partial rather than complete image, each at a different proximity from the other. The scenes that make up the prelude and coda, through violence in the case of the one (a violence that itself evokes a series of contemporary political connections – the presence of Sky News? – as well as a deeper history concerning the loss of breath that is also loss of speech, of life, of culture), and a foreboding mystery in the case of the other (the dripping of water into the bath), together create the same unsettling juxtaposition that is

achieved elsewhere in the piece through immediate temporal and spatial proximity. The 'dark days' that appear here, while clearly having a special reference both to Cale's own life, as well as the life of Wales, surely also refer us to the darkness in which we all work, live, struggle, and in which we also create – not a darkness devoid of memory or hope, nor of beauty or love, not even a darkness devoid of brightness, but a darkness, an uncertainty, that can never be simply rendered, whose reality and significance is to be found in the own complex interplay of the elements that arise within it, elements that combine opacity and illumination, and that also encompass anger and loss, despair, and even violence.

If *Dark Days* is not to be understood in terms of the usual categories of film musical performance, or installation, neither should it be viewed as some event, if of an uncertain type, to which we, the audience, stand as passive witnesses. Cale himself talks elsewhere about the collaborative nature of his work, even of his mother as his first collaborator. And here too, in the work that is *Dark Days*, collaboration is an important element. We, the audience, who are also more than audience, are drawn into participation in the work, as collaborators in the work, through our movement among the projected images that appear before us, through the way we ourselves contribute to the particular interplay of sight, sound and space as that is opened before us, and whose weft and weave surrounds us. The collaboration that Cale talks about as running throughout his work, from his childhood introduction into music and art, through to his mature explorations across a range of fields and genres, is surely an integral element in all composition, in all performance, in creative activity as such. Not only does it encompass the collaborative involvement of an audience, such that the work is always a collaborative enterprise between audience and artist, but every work stands within that larger collaboration that is the life of a community and a culture. Such collaboration is given in the memory of history and tradition, without which no work, not even the most experimental and avant-garde is possible (for even the experimental only is experimental as it stands in relation to an already established mode of practice), in the current environment within which any artist must work, and which will always be a presence, in some form, in that work, and in the very engagement that is creative practice – such an engagement is above all an engagement and a collaboration with existence itself, an engagement and collaboration with the world, and engagement and collaboration with ourselves (and the last is the perhaps the hardest part of all). One might say, as Cale does, that collaboration completes a work, but if so, it is in the sense that it is collaboration that brings a work to the completeness of presence, where the completeness at issue is never a closing off or a cessation, but precisely an opening up of relations that are enabled in and through the work itself. It is just such an opening up – an opening up that

refuses resolution and refuses too the usual forms of completeness – that *Dark Days* achieves. It is an opening up of both work and world; an opening up of artist and, when it is genuinely encountered, of audience also. It is the opening up of a past, a present, and also of a place.

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Hobart March 2011