

T S ELIOT Shadowing Scheme

Student rationale for Philip Gross' *The Water Table*

I love the River Severn. I see it every time I cross the bridge into Wales, half water, half mud, half river, half sea. Philip Gross captures it perfectly in "The Severn Song", and takes its nebulosity even further. Because you cannot see where water changes to mud, or river to sea, he explores the concept that it can be all these things at the same time, "not this-then-that, not either-or". It is brown and blue, flowing and still. We are old and young, father and son, "we were no age at all". This beautifully illustrates the power of perception, "two things can be true".

Through the most vivid of representations, "the kind of water that's thicker than blood" Gross captures his audience with the beauty of his written word. The fluidity of the piece naturally represents the water that is at the heart of his poetry, something that can be so still and yet so rough and powerful, "with waves that did not break or fall". And yet, the poem is, in part, of course, not about the river at all. It is about something just as indefinable as water: "self". Just as the river is "not this-then-that, not either-or", so too is the self, both particular and otherwise all at the same time. He is old and young, you and I, alluding to the concept that an individual can have multiple characteristics. And just as the river becomes one with the sea, so we are one with the world: both a small part, and the whole thing, all at the same time.

The same theme continues in 'The Moveable Island' that is both there and not, "most there only when you look away...whichever shore you look from, it seems closer to the other"- perfectly unattainable. The island might be real or imagined. Maybe it represents dreams and ambitions, always just out of reach, "like a thought into sleep". In "Severn Song", Gross focuses largely on the languid river, whereas here he reminds us that the Severn has forty foot tides, and strong bore – "these grand tides like a lesson in bad governance, all power..." In a wonderful touch, he mocks their lack of a "fixed purpose", likening them to God dithering. And yet, despite all this, the poem is as much about absence as presence: an island that may be nothing more than an imagining of his ageing binoculars in a constantly shifting river – a river that is at the heart of both poems. For while the poems deal in the fluid nature of self, part of the joy is that they are firmly grounded by the solid physical geographical fact that is the River Severn. These poems truly stood out to me and it is for this reason that I believe the works of Philip Gross should be credited; they are inspiring to read and equally as thought-provoking. I have enjoyed them immensely.

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