Final Issue

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Poetry
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Reviews
Three footnotes to Margaret Tait’s film

The varied career of Margaret Tait (1918-1999) included work as filmmaker, poet, story writer and doctor. In the early fifties she studied filmmaking in a post-war Italy influenced by the neo-realists, and subsequently made many short films. The colour of the Quink ink which sat on her writing table provided the three words for the title of her only feature film, Blue Black Permanent (1992), a phrase to which she added a rich set of meanings. This relatively unknown masterpiece has received surprisingly little critical attention, even in the recent collection of readings on her work edited by Todd & Cook (2004). The three literary links described here develop a few aspects of the film and are in no way a general analysis.

Margaret’s work is characterised by artistic reticence rather than licence. Using her poems as sources of information respects her desire for privacy because a poet gives implicit permission to use any autobiographical elements in a published poem. The self-reflexive last line of Shakespeare’s sonnet 18, “So long lives this, and this gives life to thee,” is more often true when the final word “thee” is replaced by “me.”

A plot summary of Blue Black Permanent

The initial idea for Blue Black Permanent may have come from a real event, but the circumstances became completely changed in Margaret’s imagination during the many years in which she worked on plans for the film. One of its time spaces is a more or less contemporary Edinburgh, perhaps just at the end of the 1980s. Barbara Thorburn (Celia Imrie), a photographer by profession, is living with Phillip Lomax (Jack Shepherd), who no longer sees his children since he separated from his wife. Barbara is still trying to come to terms with her mother’s death by drowning nearly thirty years earlier. At one point Barbara says “I would like to have a baby,” but Phillip is quickly disabused of taking this statement at face value when she says it is impossible.

In a separate timeframe thirty years before, Barbara’s mother, Greta (Gerda Stevenson), is married to a decent but dull husband Jim Thorburn (James Fleet) who sees no value in the poems she writes in her notebooks, one of which she always carries with her. Greta suffers two areas of major conflict: it is difficult to reconcile her life as artist with her life as mother and wife; and she feels drawn back from the city to her place of birth in Orkney. Like the Primula scotica which she successfully searches for in the grass of an Orkney clifftop, she may be incapable of surviving elsewhere. Being uprooted may have contributed to Jim’s dullness since the older Barbara says he has found happiness after returning to his origins in the Borders with his second wife. Doubt remains about the death of Greta’s mother who drowned in a dangerous place that she had warned her children against.

Andrew Cunningham, an artist (Sean Scanlan), is a friend of both Greta and Barbara. He tells Greta that it is impossible to be an artist and to have a domestic life. When Greta visits his attic studio he has begun to vary paintings of his sole model Wendy (Hilary Maclean) with the roofscapes which will form a major part of his life’s work.

Greta has been spending a holiday by the sea with her two young sons and her daughter, a young Barbara, when one night she walks into the sea and drowns. There is just enough doubt for Barbara to continue wondering whether her mother intended to kill herself. An optimist might be comforted that the process becomes increasingly articulate. Greta’s mother left no record and Greta’s father, Sam Kelday (Walter Leask), finds it too painful to talk about her death, but Greta’s death is discussed and some of her poems survive her. After many years Barbara becomes able to speak for herself and survives.

1. The Lowry link

In Orkney there is always an awareness of the sea, often heard if out of sight. The islands are scattered like rocks in a temple garden, with only a small part of the archipelago visible at one time. Even at midsummer the boats shudder from the waves as they make their passage. This beauty and danger is caught at the close of the film by an unaccompanied male voice singing the Manx fishermen’s hymn:

Hear us, O Lord, from heaven Thy dwelling place,
Like them of old in vain we toil all night,
Unless with us Thou go who art the Light,
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Come then, O Lord, that we may see Thy face.

Thou, Lord, dost rule the raging of the sea When loud the storm and furious is the gale, Strong is Thine arm, our little barks are frail, Send us Thy help, remember Galilee. Amen.

Most viewers of the film will fail to pick up the reference Malcolm Lowry, one of Margaret's favourite writers. The Manx hymn meant so much to Lowry that he used the whole of the first line as the title of the book of interlinked short stories almost completed when he died. (The title will be abbreviated to Hear us O Lord.) The hymn is printed with its music at the start of the story collection in which many of its phrases will recur. It is reprinted complete except for the amen in The Forest Path to the Spring where an autobiographical narrator introduces it as follows:

There is no hymn like this great hymn sung to the tune of Peel Castle with its booming minor chords in which sounds all the savagery of the sea yet whose words of supplication make less an appeal to, than a poem of God's mercy...

The Forest Path to the Spring in Hear us O Lord (Lowry 1961:223)

A reference to Lowry earlier in the film may be to acknowledge an influence that extends beyond providing the closing hymn. In Barbara and Phillip's flat there are several books on the table that holds carved elephants and the framed photograph of what are presumably Phillip's young son and daughter. Slightly separated from Finnegans Wake is a book with "Malcolm Lowry" printed in large capitals down its spine. The film has to be reconsidered in the light of Lowry.

Margaret's husband Alex Pirie introduced her to Lowry's 1947 novel Under the Volcano, regarded by many as one of greatest novels of the twentieth century. The first chapter of the novel looks back to events that took place the previous year on the Day of the Dead, 2nd November, 1939. The rest of the novel follows this last day of Geoffrey Firmin, a former consul living in a fictionalised Cuernavaca, which in 1939 was a few hours distant from Mexico City. The neglected garden of the alcoholic consul slopes down to the edge of the deep barranca or ravine that runs through the town. It is into this abyss that the consul will be plunged. The underlying tragic theme is of a man succumbing to the destructive effects of acute alcohol addiction, whilst still feeling with painful intensity the beauty of life and love, as shown by the last words he says aloud, "No se puede vivir sin amar." ("One cannot live without love," with amar denoting love in any of its many senses.) Lowry had carved a creative life out of alcoholism before his apparently accidental death in 1957, a year or two before Greta's death. It is not only in water that people drown.

This tragic sense often returns in Blue Black Permanent as Barbara tries to understand what happened to her mother. Margaret's poem Sprung Sonnet captures the desolation that Greta may have felt:

The grief for all the world which grips my heart
Un-nerves me and makes nonsense of the glee

With which I'd greet the Spring . . .

origins and elements (Tait 1959:49)

But Margaret's films and poems are not usually so doom-laden, and Blue Black Permanent demonstrates a variation in mood closer to Lowry's Hear us O Lord where there is much happiness, often bound up with a sense of place as in The Forest Path to the Spring with its lyrical description of living in a shack on the shore always at risk of destruction by the sea. Lowry's prose approaches poetry, much as Margaret's films become film poems. His love of creating vivid visual images gave him a great interest in the cinema. He wanted Under the Volcano turned into a film and he produced a screenplay for Tender is the Night. The final section of Margaret's 1964 film Where I am is here is called The Bravest Boat, taking its title but not its content from one of the stories in the Lowry collection. In his story the couple walking by the shore first met because the woman found the message in the sea-battered model boat which the man had launched as a boy years before. Here is part of the description of the shore which does in prose what Margaret does in film.

They came to the desolate beach strewn with driftwood, sculptured, whorled, silvered, piled everywhere by tides so immense there was a tideline of seaweed and detritus on the grass behind them, and great logs and
shingle-bolts and writhing snags, crucificial, or frozen in a fiery rage - [...] The fury had extended even to the beach itself, formed in hummocks and waves and barriers of shingle and shells they had to climb up in places. And everywhere too was the grotesque macabre fruit of the sea, with its exhilarating iodine smell, nightmarish bulbs of kelp like antiquated motor horns, trailing brown satin streamers twenty feet long, sea wrack like demons, or the discarded casements of evil spirits that had been cleansed. Then more wreckage: boots, a clock, torn fishing nets, demolished wheelhouse, a smashed wheel lying in the sand. Nor was it possible to grasp for more than a moment that all this with its feeling of death and destruction and barrenness was only an appearance, that beneath the flotsam, under the very shells they crunched, within the trickling overflows of winterbournes they jumped over, down at the tide margin, existed, just as in the forest, a stirring and stretching of life, a seething of spring.

The Bravest Boat in *Hear us O Lord* (Lowry 1961:24-25)

The carefully constructed closing scenes of *Blue Black Permanent* may be disconcerting on first viewing, particularly to those unacquainted with Margaret's intensity of observation. With no Lowry to provide a description, a bald account of Margaret's dynamic use of colour will have to suffice. Muted greys and blues predominate as papers on Greta's abandoned writing table flutter in front of the open window which looks out to the sea. The scene shifts to a long shot of two men against a bright blue sea lifting a body clothed in white. Back in the room, the window has been closed and the colours are lighter and warmer. One of the boys has a blue jersey and the lining of young Barbara's coat is blue, and when she turns her head she shows she has a large blue ribbon in her hair. In the next shot the sun shines on the seaside bucket, orange on the outside and blue within, before the camera moves to an extended contemplation of the pale greys of a stony beach. Dried forms are the relics or imitations of life, with blues and oranges coming from decayed ropes. Brown and red seaweed appears, sometimes sunk in sand like fossilised spinal chords. A brief splash of bright green weed shows vigorous life continuing where none might have been expected. There is an absence of blue in the surface of the calm sea studied by the camera. The male voice begins the first verse of the Manx hymn, and at the word "night" at the end of the second line the credits appear against the same plain blue background which was used with intercuts at the beginning of the film.

2. What's in Greta's notebooks?

Greta writes her poems in a set of bound notebooks which are very precious to her. When she is drying herself in the artist's studio after walking down the Playfair Steps in the storm, she panics when she thinks her current notebook is lost. After the shock of her death by drowning the four notebooks are left behind on the writing table, along with her fountain pen and bottle of Quink Blue Black Permanent ink. The husband who has never placed any value on her poetry picks up only the unfinished poem she had begun to work on. The only poem that Barbara has read is the copy in her mother's handwriting that Andrew has recently sent her. Phillip suggests they seek out whatever poems have been published.

The abandoned notebooks are partly a symbol of the unproduced works that any artist leaves behind on death, but it is possible to look for a more definite answer to the question of what is in the notebooks. This key question will unlock a new dimension to the film.

First of all, it is worth establishing the chronology of the characters. Margaret playfully sets up a system of equations and inequalities to which she will have known the solution. The modern day part of the film may be set at the end of the eighties, rather than the early nineties. Barbara says she is now older than her mother was at her death nearly thirty years ago when Barbara was nine. Greta had left school and was pursuing her unspecified studies when her mother died. She may have been studying in Edinburgh, perhaps like Margaret at the University, which would have given her the opportunity to meet Jim, whom she marries shortly after her own mother's death in the post-war period. The daffodils in the background to the storm on the Playfair Steps show that the scene takes place in the early Spring of what must be 1958 or earlier since this was the last year of the Bikini atomic weapons tests mentioned on Andrew's radio. One solution is that Greta was born in the mid-twenties, and hence is
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some years younger than Margaret. Greta drowns during the Easter holidays, probably in 1958, or perhaps a year or so after.

Margaret has placed Greta in a different social situation to herself, but has developed the character of Greta from aspects of her own personality. Greta is writing her poetry at the end of the fifties, which is when Margaret published her three books of poetry, all of them in what she called interim editions. Greta also leaves three complete but interim notebooks, with a fourth notebook containing work in progress.

Greta is a diminutive of Margaret. The answer to what is in Greta's notebooks is that they contain some of Margaret's poetry.

Margaret has found a wonderfully clever way of pointing to her own poetry without damaging the film for those who do not read the signposts. But the film gains much depth if it is reconsidered with the knowledge of what is in the notebooks, just as it has to reconsidered in the light of Lowry. Using autobiography may have been made legitimate for Margaret by her liking for Lowry. All the male protagonists in Hear us O Lord are aspects of Lowry. These separate characters have different names but are bound together by their similar personalities and interests, and by thematic recurrences, most obviously by phrases from the Manx hymn, and by variations on Frère Jacques used to reproduce the sounds of ships. It is no surprise that Margaret's reticence made her disguise her autobiographical references. Concealment was made easier for her because most viewers will have been unaware that she wrote poetry, and even the informed minority will have found access to the poems difficult. Margaret's poetry has had to be sought out in periodicals or in the rare copies of her books in the possession of libraries or friends. There has been a danger that her poetry, like Greta's, would disappear from sight.

The most obvious candidates for inclusion in Greta's notebooks occur in origins and elements, published in 1959 and containing poems written mostly in January, February and March 1958, the most likely time of crisis for Greta. The second last poem, Sprung Sonnet, has been quoted in part above, and could serve as the last entry in Greta's notebook. Storms on page 11 is the poem that Greta is composing on the Playfair Steps. The poem is reproduced in full at the end of this piece. The poem Violence, which immediately follows Storms on page 12, expresses Greta's experience of the conflict between the wild fluctuations of artistic inspiration and the routines of everyday life:

My blood needs violence.
On its own it doesn't get along fast enough.
The rate at which it chortles through my brain
Does fine, normally, sure,
But my soul has to touch the peaks and
bump on the hollows
And not be day after day normal, or usual.
Searching on the mountain tops
Or at the bottom of the sea
I find material serviceable also for the serene valleys.
When I have been away searching
This is what I bring back to distribute.
Railway trains don't reach the mountain tops and
By the house stair it's impossible to arrive at the
bottom of the sea.
Eruptions throw you up
And chasms suck you down.
The shattering battering violence only can introduce
me to those all but inaccessible places.

Violence in origins and elements (Tait 1959:12)

Something of what happens when Greta visits Andrew's studio is suggested by Margaret's collection of poems The Hen and the Bees (1960a), which has for its cover a lithograph by Robin Philipson, an artist noted for a sensuous use of thick layers of richly coloured paints. Like Margaret, Greta is in her element in such a place. The diverse collections of objects in painters' (and film) studios are not clutter because their use raises them to the dignity of tools which Margaret celebrates in her poem For Using (1960a:6). Andrew's studio is also the place where the beauty of the female face and body is caught when his model Wendy poses with her dancer's costume or without it. Margaret's poem sequence Queens (1960a:14-36) celebrates the beauty of women, sometimes naked, but always engaged as active agents, and usually powerful. Away from her role in the studio, Wendy is as conventional as Jim in attitude. They both keep out of the storm, she in her Crawford's tearoom and he in his office where the lights flicker briefly. When Greta walks
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barefoot round the studio in a borrowed shawl, she glances briefly at the throne-like chair used in poses. Andrew should have painted her.

3. Gerda as Greta

Margaret sees future generations as reincarnating their ancestors, which makes the role of the childless harder:

Perhaps in three, five, twenty generations Shall live another Allison. I shall not know, nor my descendants, for I have none.

But Allison continues
Not only in what she has sung, Not only in what she has written, or done, Not only in what she has said to us or told to the children, But in those children's selves, Their genes and chromosomes, Their cells and nuclei, fears and reflexes, Their laughter and their tears, And even the inflexion of the voice.

Extract from Allison in subjects and sequences (Tait 1960b:15)

Margaret's films show how much she loved children although she had none herself. Blue Black Permanent allows her to create her own descendants, and recreate herself. Barbara reproduces some of Greta's characteristics, and hence some of Margaret's. She reminds Andrew of Greta as she examines his studio with a similar excitement, but a more active involvement. Greta had only looked at the small artist's lay-figure of the human body, but she rearranges it and photographs it; Barbara touches the wet oil-paint too, but she goes to wipe her fingers on Andrew's overall; and she looks out the same window as Greta did. The mother/daughter resemblance goes further back since Greta reminds her father Sam Kelday of his dead wife. In a parallel teacher/student relationship, Greta says that Andrew is her model, mentor and guru, and Barbara thinks of Greta as her elder and model.

In subjects and sequences (Tait 1960b) and elsewhere Margaret explores the inadequate range of roles available to women at the end of the fifties: wife, mother, child, gossip, cook, bitch, "Eve the wicked lady," bluestocking, manly, an extinguished light, forbidden to dance, one of "those who carry the guilt/ Of men's gingerbread notions..." Barbara's social situation is closer to Margaret's than Greta's since she has the artistic freedom that her photography gives her, and she makes sure she keeps her emotional independence even in her relationship with friend/lover Phillip. But Greta is closer to Margaret in attitude as she continues to create her poems in adverse conditions with no public recognition.

The poetic ear of Margaret must have been pleased by the assonance between the forenames of Greta and the actress who was to play her, Gerda Stevenson. Lowry in cabbalistic mood would have seen this as a good portent for the film. Gerda was of an age to be Margaret's daughter, which allowed Margaret to recreate a younger self of more than thirty years before. Good actors play widely different characters, but some roles have greater resonance with their own feelings. Gerda understood the role so well that Margaret did not have to give much explicit direction. This may have been Margaret's style in any case, heightened by a concern not to introduce too many explicitly autobiographical elements. Margaret gave copies of her other books to Gerda, but withheld origins and elements, the most relevant to the role. It was not until 2004 that Gerda finally saw the volume.

Margaret and Gerda are in their element in storms (and studios). If Margaret's Storms is Greta's poem for the Playfair Steps, the poem Carlin's Loup composed completely independently by Gerda celebrates a similar intensity of delight, and illustrates how well suited she was to play Greta. The title of Gerda's poem means "witch's leap," the name given to the prominent rock in Carlops, a village a few miles outside Edinburgh.

Storms

I wished for a storm to test my strength against.
I cried for the gale-force wind, For electric explosions, For sheets of rain. I looked to the motionless wisps of cloud, To the serene blue of the sky And wished them transformed. I wished to be battered and to emerge triumphant. I love the beating heat of the uncovered sun And the magic stillness of a wet evening after rain.
And a calm of the sea which makes it look like heavy melted deep-coloured stuff; But, meantime, through it all, I crave the wave beating Lashing the untamed earth I live on And the screaming of the wild atmosphere I live in. The violence of it pumps my blood faster.

Margaret Tait: origins and elements (1959:11)

Storm at Carlin's Loup Rock

Winter's black hand whips my hair into a sudden tree. "Dance or die!" skirl the real ones, and my feet itch down the path to the early bus.

"Night Speed" glares a bulb-spangled truck and is gone.

I stand like a stone, let sky, wind and rain press the weight of their season into my skin.

No sign of my bus yet, but Cutty Sark's in the air, her breath on my neck.

Rather than travel, I'd fling her my hand, sink time in a whirlpool and Strip the Willow round Carlin's Loup.

(Cutty Sark is the wild witch admired by the hero in Burns' Tam o'Shanter.)

Gerda Stevenson: Invisible Particles (nd:2)

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Errata

Page 9, left hand column. 2nd paragraph: read "reference to Malcolm Lowry." Last paragraph: for 1939 read 1938 (twice).

Page 9, right hand column. First paragraph: in "one cannot live without love" replace love with lovino. 2nd last paragraph: for Where I am is here read Where I Am is Here.

Page 11, left hand column, last paragraph: origins and elements should be italicised.