

## *Edward Nobles*

### A Poetry of Connection

Tess Gallagher. *Amplitude: New and Selected Poems*. Graywolf Press, 1987. 199 pages. \$15.

... when you hug someone you want it  
to be a masterpiece of connection  
(“The Hug”)

Tess Gallagher’s poetry is not pure literature. And her new book *Amplitude* is not a collection of art. Each poem stands before the reader as one imperfect creature stands before another. A mutually sumpathetic encounter, one has something important to say and the other needs to listen. Unlike the chilly mariner, Gallagher does not force herself upon her guests. She does not so much report a tale as share an experience. The fate of each, speaker and reader, is equally at stake. Gallagher’s best poems say, “Here’s where we are, you and I. What should we do? We are all in this together. We are human.”

... those lives  
happened out of her and into me and out  
again, because I couldn’t remember, only be  
warmed by them. Somehow my forgetting insured  
returns to that hovering population in her  
memory, of which, as I found, I was a part.  
(“Present”)

Moving through the eleven years of poetry found in *Amplitude* (68 poems from 3 previous collections and 26 new poems), I am amazed at the consistency, the honesty, the passion. Even in the clumsiest of poetic moments, there is an urgency that carries the reader to where the poet’s craft and content come together effectively and peak. All poets have these rough moments, but not many writers can keep them from dragging down the poems into mediocrity, or even lower. This is perhaps the reward of caring — caring about

what you have to say, to whom you have to say it, and how it must be said. It is Gallagher's faithfulness to her perceptions of reality and art, even if (or because) at times idiosyncratic or excessive, that allows her poems to reach their heights of accomplishment. No matter how critical one is with her work, it is no small thing to say that Tess Gallagher is among the finest and most conscientious poets of her generation.

Even grief has instructions,  
 like the boats gathering light  
 from the water and the separate  
 extensions of roots. So remembering  
 is only one more way of being alone  
 when the voice has gone everywhere  
 in the dusk of the porches  
 looking for the last thing to say.

(“Rhododendrons”)

These lines represent well the best of what is found in Gallagher's early work, the poems of the first two books, *Instructions to the Double* (1976) and *Under Stars* (1978). Here is the mystery of Gallagher's vision, the entrancing voice of understanding, the effective lining and accumulation, the unique usages of imagery and everyday diction, the effective grounding of the abstract, the subtle exaltation into meaning. There is a calm strength in poems such as this, a strength found in simplicity: “even grief has instructions.” A talented use of a single word, such as the transitional “so,” is made by the poet to work wonders, pulling us over the water and roots, back to grief and its painful wisdom. “So remembering / is only one more way of being alone.” Worlds of loneliness are opened with these few words, as we follow the searching voice of memory everywhere into the dark.

Much of the characteristic technique and tone of the early poems continues on through “Willingly” (1984) and into the new poems of “Amplitude.” However, over the years, Gallagher has carried these talents to new heights:

... When I cupped  
 my hands in their shadows, warm  
 over the heart wings, I saw the skin

of light between my fingers  
 haloed and glowing. Three steps I  
 took with you, for  
 you, three light years traveling  
 to your sky, beak  
 and claw of you, the soft burr of flight  
 at my finger bones.

(“Bird-Window-Flying”)

The pacing of these lines, created by the precision of caesuras and line breaks, captures the delicacy of the moment, the difficult traveling through time “to your sky.” Rather than appearing “written,” poems such as this blossom out of themselves. The technique, voice and imagery are thickly woven, and, unlike so many other writers, the poet (or speaker) participates *with* the poem, is involved closely in its unfolding. Peter Davison accurately describes Gallagher’s gifts when he praises her for “utilizing all the resources of language to explore the nuances of feeling, the nature of the passage of time, and, most intricately, the nature of language itself.” Gallagher’s obsessions: feeling, time and language. Certainly a commendable triumvirate. And her topics? Predominantly relationships — family (she has a number of moving family poems), lovers, strangers, and the varieties of self. Gallagher investigates her relationships, and our perceptions of ourselves and others, through her involvement with those three worthies, the obsessions of her art.

I have gone in to build my fire. All  
 the walls, all the  
 wings of my house are burning. The flames  
 of me, the long hair  
 unbraiding.

Thus ends “Bird-Window-Flying,” one of Gallagher’s best poems. That is, one of the best of her finely-tuned, sculpted lyrics; for, with Gallagher, there is more than one manner in which to investigate the world.

Compare “Rhododendrons” and “Bird-Window-Flying” to the opening of a recent poem, “Their Heads Bent toward Each Other Like Flowers”:

Those who hold themselves above suicide

(and who could blame them?) would make a joke of your efforts and how we both survived. Sometimes I can't help myself and a shred of the story slips out of the silence —

The narrative has always played an important part in Gallagher's work (see, for instance, "Black Money" or "Breasts" from *Instructions to the Double*; or, "The Ballad of Ballymote" or "My Mother Remembers That She Was Beautiful" from *Under Stars*), but it is not until *Willingly* that the narrative becomes a dominant strain. At least half of the later poems are based heavily on story. They utilize an interspersed conversational tone, and follow more closely the dictates of the narrative structure. Once begun, the story slips out:

I came into that house we shared  
 near the wise, gray Atlantic and, as one bewildered,  
 you showed me where the pistol went off suddenly,  
 unexpectedly, before you could lift it  
 to your head. "There," you said, and we looked up  
 to the neat bird-sized entry  
 in the plaster . . .

Occasionally the narrative outweighs the poet's usual concerns for craft and control, but her stories are always interesting, and the speakers' personal involvement always rings true. In her best narrative-based poems, such as "Their Heads Bent toward Each Other Like Flowers" quoted above, she has a wonderful way of blending characterization and plot within the movements of the lyric.

Though the world's evils are never ignored, Gallagher's growth as a poet has been one toward light. Not so much a spiritual quest, but an opening of the heart to the outer world (Emily Dickinson taking a Whitmanesque journey). Increasingly, Gallagher presents the world as multidimensional: a private world, a public world, and a mystery that pulsates in undercurrents beneath them both, pulling them together or apart. Her poems initially moved within an enclosure of the self; the later poems have placed a number of tentacles outside that space into a wider domain. And this is true both with subject and style.

Gallagher's most risky poems — such as "Photograph of a Lighthouse Through Fog" or "Devotion: That It Flow; That There Be Concentration" — would not have been possible in the world of the

first two books. "Rain extravagantly that morning kept us / at the coffee shop, discussing what? Our era?" From this calm beginning, "The Story of a Citizen," a ninety-six lined poem of frightening wild power, accelerates — "Just / listening made you hunger for extremities":

. . . Yet dogs seemed so obvious, so  
eminently popular. Kick one and a regiment of  
defenders will taint your history. But,  
like a government casting about for the right  
passion to assist its military decor, a kick  
was needed: so you kicked.

What begins as an outrageous directive, progresses to a determined way of life, a heritage:

. . . the history of how I became a soldier — I,  
whose only patriotic act had been the continued  
love of myself in the body of a woman.  
A woman forced through soldierly fear to  
rejuvenate a childhood relationship with God.  
A woman twice visited by ownership in marriage,  
who invested tumultuously in the promise of love  
eternal because it appealed to her among the other  
friendly disengagements. That woman, that  
self-appointed kicker of dogs, conscripted now  
like every other woman, man and dog . . .

As a rule Gallagher does not gamble with style (not as Eliot, Gertrude Stein or Marianne Moore, for instance, took stylistic leaps), but she is not afraid to follow her intuitions, to "leave the mistakes in," as she puts it, in order to take a poem further. As she quotes from Cathal, an Irish singer: "you can sing sweet / and get the song sung / but to get to the third dimension / you have to sing it / rough, hurt the tune a little." Where with a lesser writer such a practice would be disastrous, Gallagher proves that she can bring a poem to a new dimension by allowing the writing to go where it needs to go, without intrusion of fulfilling set expectations or slick poeticizing.

As to where Gallagher's poetry will move after *Amplitude*, perhaps only her muse knows for sure. But one thing is certain: Tess Gallagher's poetry is a poetry that matters. She is an exciting writer, with a voice of passion gauging our times.