

A Talk on 'Modern Times'

JCG – 21 November 2017

by

Eckart Weber

Here's the plug!

For private tuition, you can contact me at

eckartweber099@gmail.com

or on 07797 753560

Thank you!

Modern Times:

From Horrors

to

Hopes

The Power of the Past

The Power of Language and the Imagination

Horrors - The Power of the Past

*'Oh God oh God. How can I
keep on living?'*

The Handmaid's Tale, p.205



***CZESLAWA KWAKA, BORN AUGUST 15, 1928.
ARRIVED AT AUSCHWITZ ON DECEMBER 13,
1942, AND DIED THERE MARCH 12, 1943***

1. The Holocaust as the pre-eminent markers of the horrors of modern times

(a section on Hiroshima as the other 'pre-eminent marker of modern times', had to be left out because of time constraints, but is available in the handout)

Hopes - The Power of Language and the Imagination

'Everything considered, the determined soul will always manage'

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

2. Creating meaning and myth out of the horrors of modern times
 - a) *The Handmaid's Tale* – the struggle against fascism, totalitarianism and patriarchy.
 - b) *Top Girls* – empowering the audience to find solutions; Brechtian and socialist dramaturgy
 - c) *Feminine Gospels* –the transformational power of poetry.



*'So she's dead, and I am safe,
after all... I feel great relief. I
feel thankful to her. She has
died that I may live'*

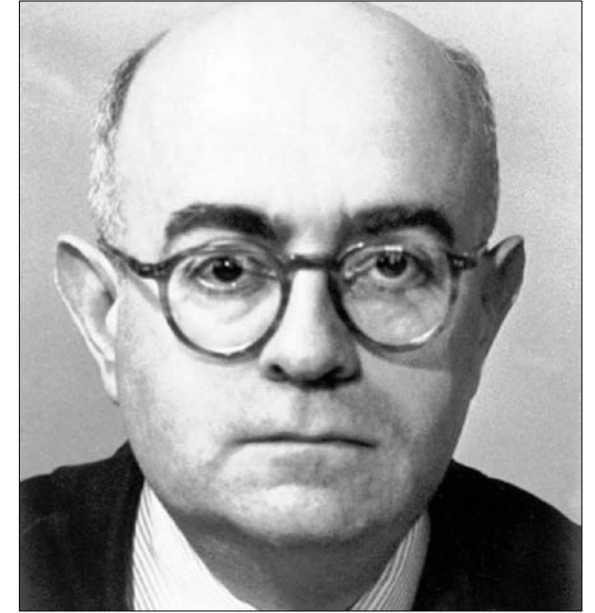
(The Handmaid's Tale, p. 298)



***THE HANGING OF THE JEWISH PARTISAN MASHA
BROSKINA IN MINSK, BELORUSSIA, BY GERMAN
SOLDIERS, 26 OCTOBER 1941***

‘**whether** after Auschwitz you can go on living--especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, **may** go on living. ... this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.’ [emphasis added]

(Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1966)



*THEODOR ADORNO,
GERMAN PHILOSOPHER,
1903 – 1969.*

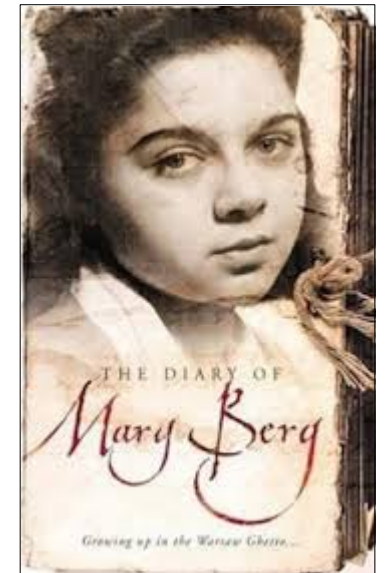
Paul Celan (1920 – 1970)

- Romanian Jew but grew up in a German speaking family.
- Both his parents died in the camps but he survived.
- Poet and translator
- Most famous poem: '**Death Fugue**' (available in handout later)



Mary Berg (1924 – 2013)

- Born as Miriam Wattenberg in Lodz in Poland
- Wrote her diary while living in the Warsaw Ghetto where she, her family and thousands of Jews were imprisoned by the Nazi forces occupying Poland.
- Mary's mother was American, which allowed the family to be exchanged for German prisoners and eventually to make their way to America in March 1944, where her diary was published in 1945.



Explore the SIGNIFICANCE of how Berg writes about her experience and the way in which she bears witness to the atrocities that were happening around her. Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that the writer shapes meanings.

[25 marks]

'August, 1942

. . .

I cannot go on living; my strength is exhausted. How long are we going to be kept here to witness all this?

. . .

Dr. Janusz Korczak's children's home is empty now. A few days ago we all stood at the window and watched the Germans surround the houses. **Rows of children, holding each other by their little hands, began to walk out of the doorway. There were tiny tots of two or three years among them, while the oldest ones were perhaps thirteen. Each child carried a little bundle in his hand. All of them wore white aprons. They walked in ranks of two, calm, and even smiling. They had not the slightest foreboding of their fate.** At the end of the procession marched Dr. Korczak, who saw to it that the children did not walk on the sidewalk. Now and then, with fatherly solicitude, he stroked a child on the head or arm, and straightened out the ranks. He wore high boots, with his trousers stuck in them, an alpaca coat, and a navy-blue cap, the so-called Maciejowka cap. He walked with a firm step, and was accompanied by one of the doctors of the children's home, who wore his white smock. This sad procession vanished at the corner of Dzielna and Smocza Streets. They went in the direction of Gesia Street, to the cemetery. **At the cemetery all the children were shot.** We were also told by our informants that Dr. Korczak was forced to witness the executions, and that he himself was shot afterward.'

The Diary of Mary Berg

'Please Ms Duncan or Ms Batty or Mr Milner, I don't want to talk about this, let alone write an analysis about those little children, not under any circumstances. But especially not as an exam practice or in an exam situation, where I am expected to gain marks for saying something 'interesting' or 'insightful' or 'significant' about how Mary Berg 'shapes meaning'.

This is offensive and I don't want to do it.


All I want to do is cry.'

The word 'meaning'

In the philosophical sense:

- something that gives us hope in our lives to keep on living
- something that gives us a purpose

How can we
connect
these two
meanings of
the word
'meaning'?



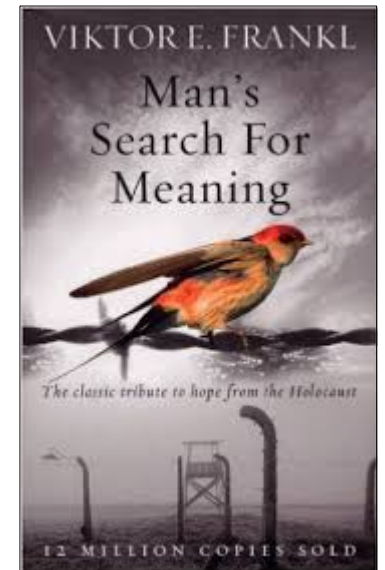
In the literary sense:

(as given in the AQA Specification)

- involves understanding the idea of 'signification'.
- 'significance' involves weighing up all the potential contributions to how a text can be analysed:
 - through the way the text is constructed and written;
 - through text specific contexts that can be relevantly applied;
 - through connecting the text(s) to other texts;
 - and then finding potential meanings and interpretations.

Viktor Frankl (1905 – 1997)

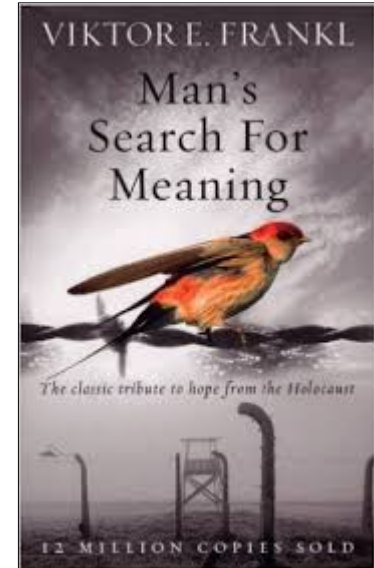
- Born in Vienna into a Jewish family
- Survived three years in various Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz
- Psychiatrist and neurologist
- Most famous book: ***Man's Search for Meaning*** (available in handout later)



Man's Search for Meaning

“Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.”

“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”




The word 'meaning'

In the philosophical sense:

- “Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only **by lack of meaning and purpose.**”
- “When we are no longer able to change **a situation**, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

How can we
connect
these two
meanings of
the word
'meaning'?



In the literary sense:

(as given in the AQA Specification)

The **significance or meaning** of Mary Berg's writing, in an **exam situation**

Read the following extract carefully. It is taken from the **diary** of a **young woman**, Mary Berg, published in the **USA in 1945**. Mary wrote her diary while living in the Warsaw Ghetto where she, her family and thousands of Jews were imprisoned by the Nazi forces occupying Poland. Mary's mother was American, which allowed the family to be exchanged for German prisoners and eventually to make their way to America in March **1944**.

Explore the SIGNIFICANCE of how Berg writes about her experience and the way in which she **bears witness** to the atrocities that were happening around her. Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that the writer shapes meanings.

[25 marks]

'August, 1942

. . .

I cannot go on living; my strength is exhausted. How long are we going to be kept here to witness all this?

. . .

1. A Diary?! In these horrific circumstances!? WHY?

2. Because she wanted to BEAR WITNESS – this is what gave her life MEANING/ SIGNIFICANCE/PURPOSE in the sense that Frankl talks about

3. Look at the dates: she escaped to the USA in 1944 and only a year later her diary was published. There seems to be have been a great sense of urgency to get it published quickly, so that the world would learn about the atrocities. This confirms her heroic purpose.

4. Like Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* and like Paul Celan who eventually committed suicide at the age of 50, Mary Berg feels she 'cannot go on living' but SHE DID – further evidence of her heroic purpose.

‘There were tiny tots of two or three years among them...They walked in ranks of two, calm, and even smiling. They had not the slightest foreboding of their fate... At the cemetery all the children were shot.’

“If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering.”

Really, Victor Frankl? When it comes to children, I think I disagree.

“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

Hopes - The Power of Language and the Imagination

'Everything considered, the determined soul will always manage'

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942

2. Creating meaning and myth out of the horrors of modern times
 - a) *The Handmaid's Tale* – the struggle against fascism, totalitarianism and patriarchy.
 - b) *Top Girls* – empowering the audience to find solutions; Brechtian and socialist dramaturgy
 - c) *Feminine Gospels* –the transformational power of poetry.



The Handmaid's
Tale –
'Tragic Optimism'

Hope/Optimism

1. Offred doesn't give up; she doesn't kill herself.
2. Her whole narrative is nothing less than one long act of defiance
3. On the positive side, despite the strictures placed upon her by Professor Pieixoto, her feminist heroism still shines through in many passages.

qualified by

A Sense of the Tragic

1. Though we don't know what happens to her after the novel ends.
2. But, even more than a century after her life, she is still the victim of male power because Professor Pieixoto orders, her story into a very neat and tidy series of 15 sections
3. And yet, not only do the 'Historical Notes' place strictures on Offred, they also shatter the illusion that novels generally like to nurture, the illusion that this heroine is somehow 'real'. She's not, she's a fictional character. And it turns out that all along she has been the plaything of another fictional character, the Professor.

Chapter 6,
p. 43

I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind.

*'...there's a scar, no, a wound, it isn't yet healed, the colour
of tulips near the stem end, down the left side of his face,
where the flesh split recently'*

(The Handmaid's Tale, p. 114-5)

Chapter 18, p. 114-5

Here is what I believe.

I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket, a tangle of bracken, the brown fronds from last year under the green ones just unrolled, or ground hemlock perhaps, although it's too early for the red berries. What is left of him: his hair, the bones, the plaid wool shirt, green and black, the leather belt, the workboots. I know exactly what he was wearing. I can see his clothes in my mind, bright as a lithograph or a full-colour advertisement, from an ancient magazine, though not his face, not so well. His face is beginning to fade, possibly because it wasn't always the same: his face had different expressions, his clothes did not.

I pray that the hole, or two or three, there was more than one shot, they were close together, I pray that at least one hole is neatly, quickly, and finally through the skull, through the place where all the pictures were, so that there would have been only the one flash, of darkness or pain, dull I hope, like the word *thud*, only the one and then silence.

I believe this.

I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, grey cement, on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair. God knows what he's wearing. God knows what they've put him in. God isn't the only one who knows, so maybe there could be some way of finding out. He hasn't shaved for a year, though they cut his hair short, whenever they feel like it, for lice they say. I'll have to revise that: if they cut the hair for lice, they'd cut the beard too. You'd think.

Anyway, they don't do it well, the hair is ragged, the back of his neck is nicked, that's hardly the worst, he looks ten years older, twenty, he's bent like an old man, his eyes arc pouched, small purple veins have burst in his cheeks, there's a scar, no,

a wound, it isn't yet healed, the colour of tulips, near the stem end, down the left side of his face where the flesh split recently. The body is so easily damaged, so easily disposed of, water and chemicals is all it is, hardly more to it than a jellyfish, drying on sand.

He finds it painful to move his hands, painful to move. He doesn't know what he's accused of. A problem. There must be something, some accusation. Otherwise why are they keeping him, why isn't he already dead? He must know something they want to know. I can't imagine. I can't imagine he hasn't already said whatever it is. I would.

He is surrounded by a smell, his own, the smell of a cooped-up animal in a dirty cage. I imagine him resting, because I can't bear to imagine him at any other time, just as I can't imagine anything below his collar, above his cuffs. I don't want to think what they've done to his body. Does he have shoes? No, and the floor is cold and wet. Does he know I'm here, alive, that I'm thinking about him? I have to believe so. In reduced circumstances you have to believe all kinds of things. I believe in thought transference now, vibrations in the ether, that sort of junk. I never used to.

I also believe that they didn't catch him or catch up with him after all, that he made it, reached the bank, swam the river, crossed the border, dragged himself up on the far shore, an island, teeth chattering; found his way to a nearby farmhouse, was allowed in, with suspicion at first, but then when they understood who he was, they were friendly, not the sort who would turn him in, perhaps they were Quakers, they will smuggle him inland, from house to house, the woman made him some hot coffee and gave him a set of her husband's clothes. I picture the clothes. It comforts me to dress him warmly.

Offred's Creed

The Apostle's Creed

'Here is what I believe.
I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket...'
'I believe this.
I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle
some-where, grey cement...'
'I also believe that they didn't catch him or catch up
with him after all, that he made it...'

'I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Creator of Heaven and earth...'
'I believe in Jesus Christ, His only son...'
'I believe in the Holy Ghost...'

BUT...

Intensely personal, private declaration of faith - the
passage comes in section VII 'NIGHT' and, as we
know, 'The night is my time, my own time, to do with
as I will...' p. 47
Offred is acutely aware that her faith is provisional
and absolutely not certain.

Public and communal declaration of faith
True believers are secure in the faith that what they
believe is absolutely certain and true.

Chapter 18,
p. 116

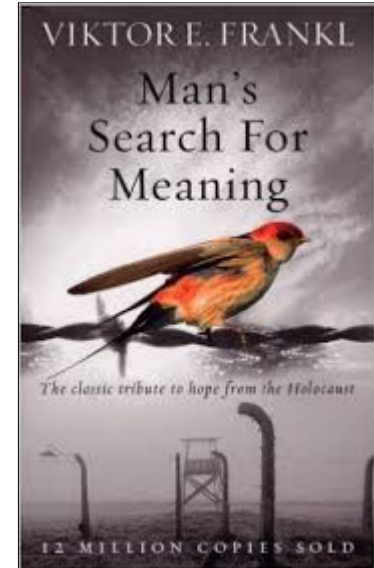
The things I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything. Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it.

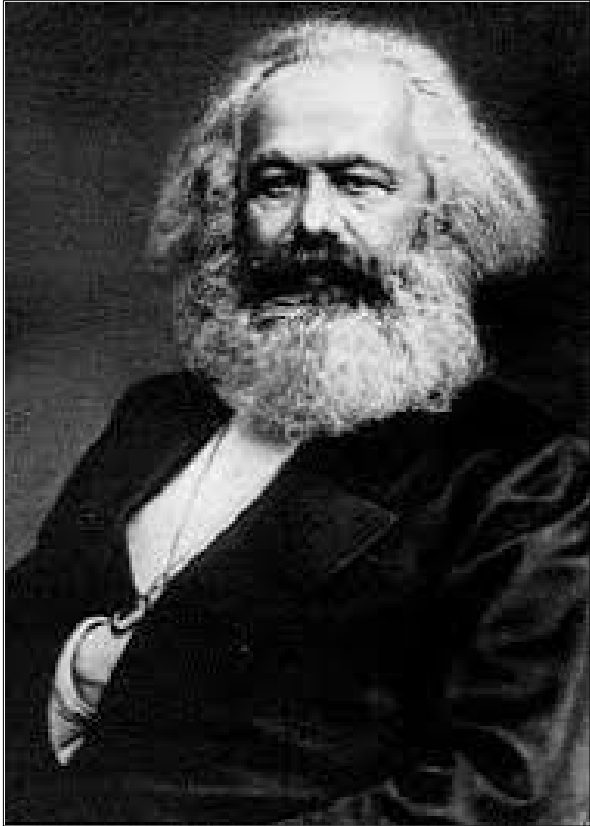
This also is a belief of mine. This also may be untrue.

Man's Search for Meaning

“The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance.”

“Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become the next moment. By the same token, every human being has the freedom to change at any instant.”





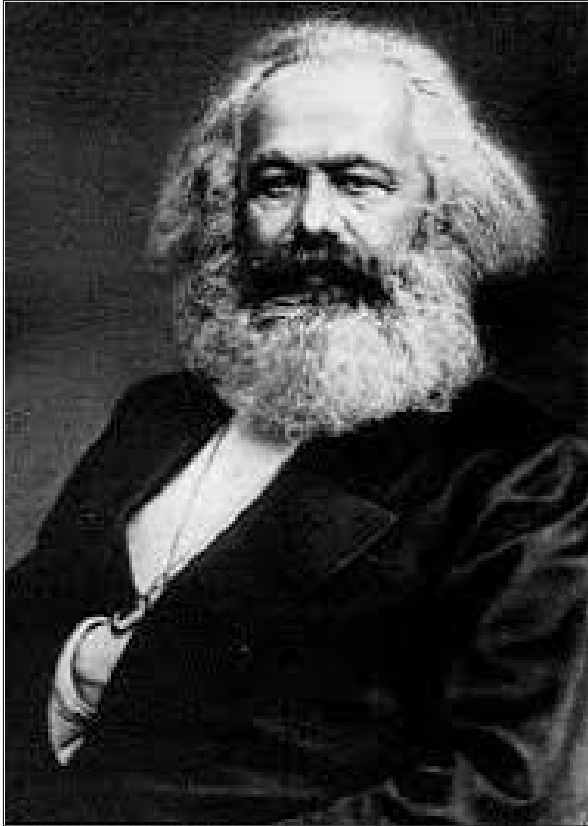
Karl Marx (1818-1883)



Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)

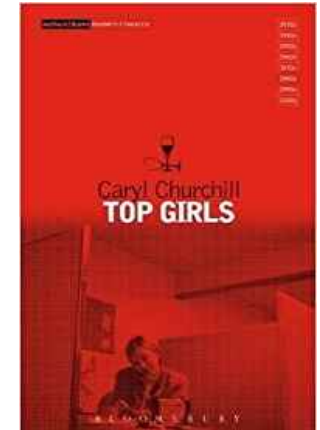
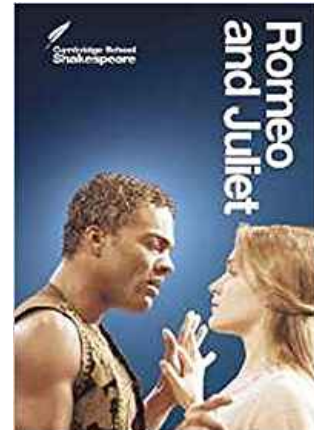
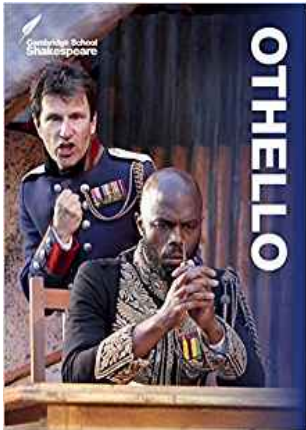


Caryl Churchill (b. 1938)



Karl Marx (1818-1883)

‘The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it.’

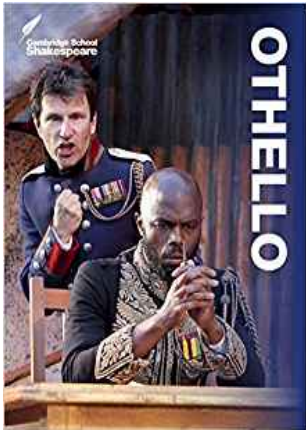


Traditional Tragedy

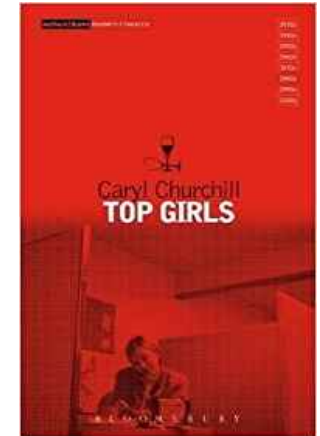
- Encourages complacency, thanks to one of the fundamental principles of tragedy: catharsis

Brechtian Stagecraft/Dramaturgy

- Seeks to empower the audience to fight for change in their lives and in society: personal, social and political revolution



I remember before I wrote *Top Girls* thinking about women barristers – and how they were in a minority and had to imitate men to succeed – and I was thinking of them as different from me. And then I thought, ‘wait a minute, my whole concept of what plays might be is from plays written by men . . .’ And I remember long before that thinking of the ‘maleness’ of the traditional structure of plays, with conflict and building in a certain way to a climax. But it’s not something I think about very often.



Traditional Tragedy

- From a Feminist perspective, the traditional elements of plot and structure are typically ‘male’: rising action, climax (providing the audience with an emotional ‘orgasm’), falling action and resolution.

Brechtian Stagecraft/Dramaturgy

- The structure tends to be ‘episodic’. Brecht and Churchill do not provide a resolution, because they want to place the responsibility for finding solutions on the audience, once they leave the theatre and go back to their lives.

Feminine Gospels –the
transformational power of
poetry.



Carol Ann Duffy (b. 1955)

The Light Gatherer

When you were small, your cupped palms
each held a candlesworth under your skin,
enough to begin,

and as you grew
light gathered in you, two clear raindrops
in your eyes,

warm pearls, shy,
in the lobes of your ears, even always
the light of smile after your tears.

Your kissed feet glowed in my one hand,
or I'd enter a room to see the corner you played in
lit like a stage set,

the crown of your bowed head spotlit.
When language came, it glittered like a river,
silver, clever with fish,

and you slept
with the whole moon held in your arms for a night light
where I knelt watching.

Light gatherer. You fell from a star
into my lap, the soft lamp at the bedside
mirrored in you,

and now you shine like a snowgirl,
a buttercup under a chin, the wide blue yonder
you squeal at and fly in,

like a jewelled cave,
turquoise and diamond and gold, opening out
at the end of a tunnel of years.