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## Standing Stones and Stanzas in Leslie Norris' "The Twelve Stones of Pentre Ifan"

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Standing Stones and Stanzas in Leslie Norris'  
"The Twelve Stones of Pentre Ifan"

The wind  
Over my shoulder  
Blows from the cold of time.

It has  
Shaped the hill,  
It has honed the rock outcrops

With the  
Granules of its  
Rasping. When the old ones

Were born  
They dropped in dark-  
ness, like sheep, and hot animals

Howled for  
The afterbirths.  
I watch the great stones of

Faith they  
Moved in the flickering  
Mountains of their nameless

Lives, and  
See once more the  
Points of adjusted rock, taller

Than any  
Man who will ever  
Stand where I stand, lifting their hope

In still,  
Huge stone, pointed  
To the flying wind. The sea ebbs again

And round  
The endless brevity  
Of the seasons the old men's cromlech

Prepares

Its hard shadows.  
The four great stones, elate and springing,

And the  
Smaller stones, big  
As a man, leaning in, supporting.

Leslie Norris (*Walking the White Fields: Poems 1967-1980*)

“Pentre Ifan -- Dramatic burial site of an important Welsh chieftain dating from 2500 B.C. See the massive 16 ft. capstone supported by three 8 foot legs of stone.” (from a guidebook)

“Pentre Ifan Burial Chamber, 3 m. S. of Nevern, off A487. One of the most striking megalithic monuments in Britain, its capstone, 17 ft. long and weighing about 20 tons, is delicately balanced 7-8 feet above the ground on four massive uprights.” (from another guidebook)

Photos of the Pentre Ifan cromlech show a huge capstone held up by four standing stones and flanked by two more.

It's a little confusing. Are there three legs or four uprights? Is the capstone 17 or 18 feet long? Are there seven stones or the twelve Norris mentions in the title of his poem? I decide to go see Pentre Ifan myself.

Darkness has fallen and I have been fighting the rain and heavy traffic for hours when I finally pull into Cardigan. I spend the night at a bookless bed-and-breakfast run by a ruddy retired policeman who says he has never heard of Leslie Norris. At breakfast I converse with two men who have ridden their motorcycles all the way from London to have a Cardigan specialty shop equip their bikes with custom exhaust systems. I'm not the only one in Cardigan on a quixotic journey.

The hard morning rain begins to abate as I steer my car cautiously up a twisty, narrow country road flanked on both sides by abrupt stone walls. I make several wrong turns, down private roads, up public lanes before a small sign finally rewards my search:

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Siamb'r Gladdu  
Pentre Ifan  
Burial Chamber  
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I leave my car at the roadside and walk along a narrow path between two fields. The stones (and they take my breath away, wild things that they have become) stand awkwardly and commandingly on a high place surrounded by valleys. Green pastures fortified with stone-and-hedge fences share the landscape with stands of trees. An occasional farm house. Below me, in the near distance, the sea curves into the land.

This megalithic monument was raised, in all likelihood, as a burial chamber. The massive stones once shaped and held open a space within a huge mound of earth. The rains and wind of millennia have stripped away the earth mound and have brought down some of the stones. In the process the visual focus has been shifted from the enclosed space to the stones themselves. They are now abstract, free-standing forms. I trace the negative space between the stones. My eyes measure the shape and weight of the huge top wedge. I feel the visceral force of the upthrusting stones. The monument no longer protects the remains of a dead chieftain, but it still represents powerfully the human vision and strength that raised the stones.<sup>i</sup>

What is there about standing stones? Why do we privilege verticality over horizontality?

We call ourselves wise -- homo sapiens -- and argue that our language and art differentiate us from other species of animals. We also define ourselves by our rising from all fours to a standing position, and we call one of our ancestors homo erectus. It has been argued (in the eighteenth century by Herder and Humboldt and again more recently by physical anthropologists) that our language ability is directly related to our erect posture. We speak because we stand. And if we are human because we speak, then standing makes us human. Ubiquitous vertical monuments raised to represent ourselves and our standing testify to this idea's world-wide potency.

On this hill, overlooking the wash of the sea, it is easy to wax philosophical.

But the monument is material, these are massive, ancient, rough, grey stones. I rub my hand against the stones, lean against them, brush my eyes across their colors. They give off a faint odor in the rain. The fact that I can smell them means these stones are evanescent, volatile. They are disappearing. The contemporary American philosopher, John Sallis, writes about the paradoxical temporality of "Stone":

The old Jewish cemetery in Prague is a jumble of gray and brownish stones crowded into a small, walled-in area in what was once the Prague ghetto. The stones are packed in so densely that one knows, even before reading of it, that several thousand are buried here. Now nearly all the stones are leaning, protruding at various inclinations from the black earth, a spectacle of utter disarray. Some are leaning at such a sharp angle that they seem ready to topple over. One has the impression that their thrust, though persistent, has grown feeble with the passing of time, that even stone, thrusting upward into the open, is drawn back toward the earth, toward the silence of those who, though dead and gone, would be memorialized by the stones. . . . Precisely because these stones show the wear of time, they can evoke an awareness of the peculiar temporality of stone: stone is ancient, not only in the sense that it withstands the wear of time better than other natural things, but also in the sense that its antiquity is of the order of the always already. Stone comes from a past that has never been present, a past unassimilable to the order of time in which things come and go in the human world; and that non-belonging of stone is precisely what qualifies it to mark and hence memorialize such comings and goings, births and deaths. As if stone were a sensible image of timelessness, the ideal material on which to inscribe marks capable of visibly memorializing into an indefinite future one who is dead and gone.<sup>ii</sup>

Rain in my face brings me back to the stones before me.

Four of the stones bear the huge wedge of the capstone. Or, more exactly, three of the stones actually lift the capstone; the fourth almost touches it, from most angles *looks* like it shares the burden. Two additional stones stand close to one side. On the other side squat two stone stumps. That makes nine. I look for other stones to make up Norris's twelve. I trust his observations implicitly. And in fact I find three more stones, as large as the standing ones. They lie half buried beside their counterparts. Visceral force resides in these heavy masses as well. *Memento mori*.

Whipped by light rain I photograph the dolmen from all sides. The wind makes it impossible to keep my lens dry.

I return to my warm car to reread Norris' poem.

The title insists on "Twelve Stones." There are indeed twelve stones, although most photos and all the guidebooks miss the two stumps and the three recumbent stones. In the body of the poem, Norris himself mentions only "The four great stones, elate and springing, / And the /

Smaller stones, big / As a man, leaning in, supporting” and the “Huge stone, pointed / To the flying wind” that caps the monument. That makes seven. Six standing and one lifted. But the title adds five to the seven explicitly described. Why the discrepancy between the title and the body of the poem?

The poem’s first sentence (which is also the first stanza) exposes the poet’s shoulder to the transforming power of wind blowing “from the cold of time.” The wind, the poet, and time. “Cold” time. Entropy. Mortality. But, for the moment, as he observes the stones, as he writes the poem, the poet withstands the powers that will ultimately bring him low. His shoulder splits the wind.

The second sentence states that neither the hill nor solid rock can resist the relentless forces (of the wind? or does “it” refer to time?). In either case, “it” has “shaped” and “honed.” These are the verbs of an artisan, of the poetic process Norris describes in similar terms in “Grooming”:

The poem stands on its firm  
legs. Its claws are filed, brush  
and curry-comb have worked  
with the hissing groom to polish

its smooth pelt. All morning, hair  
by hair, I’ve plucked away each small  
excess; remains no trace of  
barbering, and all feels natural.

It is conditioned to walk, turn  
to the frailest leash, swing  
without effort into ecstatic  
hunting. Now I am cleaning

the teeth in its lion jaws  
with an old brush. I’ll set it  
wild on the running street, aimed  
at the hamstring, the soft throat.

(Selected Poems, 116)

The fierce yet “groomed” poem “stands” (like the stones of Pentre Ifan) because the poet has “raised” it with his polishing, plucking, conditioning, cleaning, and aiming -- a process that parallels the old ones’ adjusting and then the shaping and honing of the wind and time. When read, the poem will leave that standing, static, formal position to hunt ecstatically (ecstasy - **ex** out + **histanai** to cause to stand) in the reader’s mind. Raising a monument of words or stone, the poet, sculptor, architect creates artistic substance that engenders psychological motion, repetitive motion that over individual lifetimes and generations opposes, in a sense, the ravages of time.<sup>iii</sup>

The old humans of the third sentence were far more ephemeral than rock. The traces of their births will quickly disappear. Life is short. But art is long -- so asserts the form of the lengthy fourth sentence as it stretches over parts of five stanzas. Huge stones were “adjusted,” set right,

stood up in faith by people whose lives both flickered and stood firm as mountains. They are nameless and yet the authors of this monument at Pentre Ifan. They stood stones taller than the poet, taller than any other standing observers, taller than themselves. In a phrase that (like the oxymoronic “flickering / Mountains”) expresses the poem’s basic paradox, these huge stones’ stillness, their stasis, opposes the “flying wind.”

The fifth sentence contrasts the ebb and flow of sea and the seasons with the “hard” or lasting shadows of the cromlech. In poems like the following ones from Sequences, Norris repeatedly opposes stasis (or standing) and flux:

A great tree stands in its wide  
shade; generous, still trunk.  
Its branches, stalks, leaves  
hold air and light. I stand  
at its broad foot and think  
of the rooted strength,  
large as a tree, and branched,  
wrapped about earth and stone,  
grasping the spinning world. (#6)

I stand at the land’s edge, waiting  
for what the tide will bring to me  
and what it will take away. (#41 )

The poet of these last lines stands in opposition to the turning and returning tide. But not only in opposition. The tide will bring as well as take away. Time and flux are not **only** enemies.<sup>iv</sup>

In the final sentence of “The Twelve Stones of Pentre Ifan,” Norris focuses on the “four great stones.” They are alive -- “elate and springing.” They bear the capstone, “lifting their hope” as the long fourth sentence puts it. And there are smaller stones, human-sized stones that lean in to support. With this leaning in Norris returns to where he began, to the poet’s shoulder. The “old ones” raised the stones as lasting monuments to their ephemeral lives. The poet “watches” the stones, leaning in to support the monument with his own shoulder, “supporting” by lifting or raising his own stones, his own standing structures, his “stanzas” (related to the Latin **stare** -- to stand), stanzas that are, not accidentally, twelve in number. In his poem Norris has raised twelve new stones about or to Pentre Ifan; and the stanzas’ distinctive shape (the short first line, longer middle line, and even longer final line) displays the poet’s carving hand.

The fact that the poem has twelve stanzas might be one reason to call the poem “The *Twelve* Stones of Pentre Ifan,” as opposed to five or seven or nine -- all likely numbers given which stones actually stand at the site. But nothing about the poem requires twelve, as opposed to seven or nine stanzas. The answer must lie in the stones themselves. Over the millennia the cromlech has evolved, has been shaped by the forces of nature into something quite different from the burial chamber it once was meant to be. Of the twelve stones still visible, two have been reduced to stumps, and three lie half buried in the ground. They bear witness that wind “from the cold of time” will finally reduce even the last and most firmly standing stones to dust. Norris describes this in a later poem:

Where shall we rest?  
 cry stones, whose fate  
 is to knock about the world,  
 growing smaller, to fly  
 from slings and kill giants  
 while meaning no harm,  
 to mark boundaries and mileages,  
 to honor the dead  
 above their stale bones,  
 to be silent.

(#31, Sequences)

The stones that have stood as monuments and acted as missiles grow inevitably smaller and will finally, fatefully, “be silent.” There is no escape. But there is the not inconsequential ongoing human process. The poet can and does make new monuments, remakes monuments that would otherwise disappear. In “A Sense of History,” for example, the poet walks on a moor in “an unhedged wind enough to knock your head off” and finds “an incongruous water” created by an artificial bank of stone:

And, head down along the edge, I could not help notice  
 How all the long perimeter was similarly guarded  
 With single slices of stone, each patiently placed  
 Against the waves’ water and into a crude mosaic.

Who dry-walled these shores? What men had planned  
 These back-breaking banks and lived on the low  
 Secure island? (It is there still, and still the stone  
 Ungainly circles that were houses how long ago).

I only know that I was suddenly kneeling--  
 While over me flew the torn, unheeding froth--  
 And plugging with scales of stone the wave-worn gaps,  
 Ten frozen fingers against the loud storm’s tooth.

Then heading homeward through the embracing marshland,  
 I faithfully found with quick and unearned skill  
 The hidden paths that led to the acquired valley,  
 Quite dry and hidden, away from wind, lake, hill.

(Selected Poems, 36)

This “acquired valley” is reminiscent of the “Points of adjusted rock” in the *Pentre Ifan* poem, and the “T” recalls the creator of twelve new stanzas that carry on the tradition, the tradition that will and must ultimately fail, but that is our only tool against time.<sup>v</sup>

Similarly contrasting human construction with the depredations of time, Norris's fine late poem "Bridal Veil Fall, Early Winter" describes a frozen Utah waterfall, and much else besides:

The season's freeze has locked the waterfall,  
its wavering fluid, into a cold permanence.  
The last arcs of free spray, crystalised  
in mid-air, are scattered among the stones.  
Here is a preserved droplet, a victorian stopper,  
which will not melt for months. Water is held,  
as these lines hold under the bite of words.  
The wind is the one sound, hissing  
into the crevice over the quiet ice.

For seventy hardening seasons I've watched  
the stopping of waterfalls. Some of the time  
I knew and perhaps understood how water  
changed in winter, what happened to molecules,  
how the structures of elements could petrify  
in a night from bounding liquid to  
an obdurate smoothness. Not any longer.  
All that's confusing now. I am content  
to watch the world turn cold with its old grace.

Soon younger men will come, active, dressed  
against ice, with crampons and pitons, coils  
of nylon rope, looking up quite differently  
from the river bed. They'll wear their red  
windproofs on the pallor of the ice,  
search for fingerhold and toehold, secure  
their spiked boots, begin to climb.  
It's grim work. At first one sees them progress  
with a quick elegance, straight up, few overhangs.

But soon they must steady, take the ice axe  
from its holster, with brisk hacks  
of the blade cut steps out of the sliding  
fall, blocks of cold spoil dropping  
to the valley floor, skittering down.  
They'll pull themselves up to the line  
of sky above them, the canyon's edge.  
What then? No axe will chop footholds  
in that thin air. They won't fly, I can tell them.

Like the "permanent" ice formed from an element usually in flux, the poet makes tangible, durable

poetry out of the flux of words: “Water is held, / as these lines hold under the bite of words.”<sup>vi</sup> By comparing his poetry to ice the poet tacitly admits that as the water will ultimately melt, so too will his words inevitably fade. At the end of the poem Norris advises the young ice climbers who, with their climbing tools and protective clothing (“dressed \ against ice” -- protected from the poem), cut their way up to the canyon’s edge (or read the poem as critics, dropping “blocks of cold spoil,” the parts of the poem that don’t fit their theories). “What then?” the poet asks. Beyond the ice or poem, “No axe will chop footholds / in that thin air. They won’t fly, I can tell them.” And why can he tell them that? Because he has observed the making of ice (and of poetry) for years. The ice will melt. There is transcendence neither in criticism nor poetry. But there is the making and remaking of poetry. Things can be made to stand in the face of entropy. For a while.

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#### NOTES

- i.. Burial cairns to honor dead chieftains, stone circles built for dead priests. There is no such thing as a monument to the quiet virtues.
- ii.. “Stone,” in Endings: the Question of Memory in Hegel and Heidegger (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993).
- iii.. Norris, along with the Germanist Alan Keele, has recently translated Rilke’s Duino Elegies. There he encountered extensive play with the word “gestalten,” to give form to, which means literally “to cause to stand.” See my article “Des Dastehns grosser Anfangsbuchstab’: Standing and Being in Rilke’s Fifth Elegy,” The German Quarterly, 60, Summer 1987, 432-446.
- iv.. The last lines of Rilke’s “Sonnets to Orpheus,” recently translated by Norris and Alan Keele, express a related thought:

And when what’s earthly has forgotten you,  
say this to the silent earth: I flow.  
Speak to the rolling water: I endure.

Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1989.

- v.. I am grateful to Norma Davis for her insights into Norris’ stones. She suggested # 26 and # 37 of Sequences as applicable here, and especially “Stones” from Walking the White Fields (14), which ends with the lines “But we do not alter them. / Once in a million years / Their stone hearts lurch.”
- vi.. Norris compares a poet’s line to a standing fisherman’s line in “The Eagle and the Hummingbird” (Selected Poems, 118), once again linking the work of an artisan or a sportsman with his own:

I stand midstream on rock, its roots in water,  
Using the air to fly my singing line,  
The burning spindle drifting through the river,  
...  
All, all is here. And my thin line holds now  
The lure of the hummingbird, its spinning  
Breast, and the hooked voice of the eagle.