

Prosopopoeia: Transcript

Nicholas Perkins

One of the things that the poems also do, these riddles, is that they link up what's out there, either in the natural world or objects or whatever, with us by sometimes making those objects speak, or making a speaker of the riddle really engage and scrutinise what they're looking at. What effects happen when an object speaks to us in a poem? How do we approach that as readers?

Harriet Soper

Yes, there's a term for this that's I find quite handy sometimes. It's a Greek word and it's *prosopopoeia*, which originally meant kind of giving a face to something. And it's a term that has popped up in literary theory because people have said some quite interesting things about how, in a way, every time somebody uses the word *I*, and makes a narrative out of the word *I*, and every time they kind of write an autobiography, kind of in that mode of autobiography, that is a kind of prosopopoeia. And the idea is that it creates an impression of a coherent speaking voice that is in a way artificial – it doesn't quite reflect all the many things that happen inside a person's mind – to project this really clear, coherent narrative of the *I* in a way that's always a bit of a trick, or a joke even. And I think in some ways that's quite a handy way to think about what happens in the riddles, because we hear these beautiful narratives about 'I experience this, I experience that', and in a way it's the artificiality of that, and the way that that draws on other kinds of traditions, genres – things like a lyric would use *I* or a psalm in the biblical tradition – and the poems get connected with all those other kinds of speaking *Is*. So in a way we're thinking about, I guess, voice – things like voice and genre – more than necessarily things being totally different cause they're objects. We're kind of thinking about language itself in a way.

Nicholas Perkins

Perhaps we tend to forget that whenever someone says *I*, you know, actually either in conversation or in a poem, there's a lot that is left out of that. There's a huge amount of complexity for anyone saying 'I think this' or 'I feel this' because, to start with, you might only feel that at that particular moment, or you might be ambivalent. And so these poems do open a door, I think, into the paradoxes and sometimes like the ways in which someone saying *I* can be both one thing and another all at the same time. To me, the riddles really press that kind of question. Sometimes that's a question that, when we read literature, we might think is a really modern concern, when we think about the confusing sort of identities of modern life and modern literature. But we can see here that some sort of questions about 'Who am I and how do I talk about myself?' and 'What would it mean if something that looks inanimate actually had a self and a voice?' – those are really important questions to ask as well.