A Comparative Study of Poems

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A

(a) On a Dead Child

Man proposes, God in His time disposes,
    And so I wander'd up to where you lay,
A little rose among the little roses,
    And no more dead than they.

It seemed your childish feet were tired of straying,
    You did not greet me from your floower-strewn bed,
Yet Still I knew that you were only playing -
    Playing at being dead.

I might have thought that you were really sleeping,
    So quiet lay your eyelids to the sky,
So still your hair, but surely you were peeping;
    And so I did not cry.

God knows, and in His proper time disposes,
    And so I smiled and gently called your name,
Added my rose to your sweet heap of roses,
    And left you to your game.

(b) Beside the Bed

Some one has shut the shining eyes, straightened
    and folded
The wondering hands quietly covering the unquiet breast:
So, smoothed and silenced you lie, like a child, not again to be questioned or scolded:
But, for you, not one of us believes that this is rest.

Not so to close the window down can cloud and deaden.
The blue beyond: or to screen the wavering flame subdue its breath:
Why, if I lay my cheek to your cheek, your grey lips, like dawn, would quiver and redden,
Breaking into old, odd smile at this fraud of death. Because all night you have to turned to us or spoken It is time for you to wake; your dreams were never very deep:
I, for one, have seen the thin bright, twisted threads of them dimmed suddenly and broken.
This is only a most piteous pretence of sleep!

Both poems\(^{(1)}\) deal with the same subject and both give the subject the same basic treatment, so any comparison is bound to be on rather a small scale. Two factors suggest that Poem (a) is late Victorian\(^{(2)}\); firstly the regular, simple and rather

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\(^{(1)}\) The poems appeared anonymously.

\(^{(2)}\) The Victorian Age begins about 1830, and last till about 1890. The name Victorian is applied to it because Queen Victoria began to reign in 1837. In this period the general features of poetry are: (1) Decline of the lyric (2) More reflective and critical note (3) Scientific, religious, and other themes discussed (4) The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.
rigid verse-form, quatrains mainly in iambio pentameters with an occasional trochee and with an additional half-beat in the first and third lines. This is a form which bears no relation to the 'sense' of the lines, and it suggests a follower of Wordsworth.\(^{(3)}\)

The formal 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world' religious background is the second factor. Perhaps a third factor is the sentimental treatment of the dead child - 'a little rose among the little roses', and the pretence that the child though so still cannot really be dead; 'but surely you were peeping'; 'left you to your game'. And so the poem has certain facile attractiveness. 'How pathetic and sweet the child must have looked; how brave the parent and what a strong Faith' - such are the left with just these reactions. So, in its narrow compass the poem succeeds, for these reasons, and because of its studied simplicity of form and diction which match the subject matter, even though the verse form used is rather a rigid vehicle. But if the 'intention' and 'tone' of the poem, used as Dr. I.A. Richards used them in the 'Principles of Literary Criticism' are successful, one is left with doubts about the 'sense' and 'feeling'. Surely any reflective sort of poem should have some intellectual content, and this one has virtually none. All the poet really does is to prevent a sweet, pathetic little cameo. so if 'sense' is inadequate so also must be 'feeling', or emotional reaction. Here, the emotional reaction is bogus. One does not immediately have comforting thoughts about God at the time of a child's death - only later, if at all. Tears and a breakdown would be far more human. So one has to concede that in this way the poem fails, lacking humanity, but of course most Romantic derivative writers seem to be rather incredible people.

Poem (b) has a free-verse form, which is better adapted to the subject matter,

\(^{(3)}\) William Wordsworth was made poet laureate in 1843. His Preface gave the leading statement of the principles of the new romantic poetry: simplicity of language and of subject; characters and situations taken from the life of the common people; poetry defined as stemming from 'emotion recollected in tranquility.'
in the sense that it offers scope to the poet to try to reflect the intellectual content of his poem in word-form. For example, the gentle, uncoordinated movements of the child's hands are reflected in

Wandering hands quietly covering

and the calm of the child is shown in

'smoothed and silenced you lie'

If poem (a) is 19th century and Wordsworthian, poem (b) seems early 20th(4) and, in its imagery and use of words, keatsian(5), heither could be later as both seem pre-modern in their calm acceptance of a child's death. There seems no evidence of any attempt to restore life medically. Another keatsian aspect is the free use of metaphor and simile:- the eyelids closing the child's blue eyes are 'windows' which 'wavered flame'. The grey lips are 'like dawn'; they would 'quiver and redden'.

The poem does not pose a theological background; the writer merely states that he or she does not believe that the child's death 'is rest' - it is only 'a piteous pretence of sleep'. And so there is more realism; the acceptance of death will follow, and with it, perhaps, the parents emotional breakdown. For this reason, poem (b) is a better poem than poem (a); the emotional content is narrow, postulated at a point in time, and therefore far more genuine. The intellectual content, the 'sense' is much the same in both poems - so is the 'tone', or treatment. The 'intention' is to

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(4) The keynote of the period is revolt. The general features of the modern novel are reproduced to a remarkable degrees in contemporary poetry. It is a time of revolt, of experiment, and (to some extent) of ineffectiveness.

(5) keats is a great master in giving word-pictures. Robert Bridges in his Essays on Keats has observed" "Closely allied to these imaginative phrases and perhaps most-characteristic of Keats and peculiar to him, are the short, vivid pictures which may be called his masterpieces in word-painting, in which with a few words he contrives completely to finish which is often of vast size."
capture what is only meant as a fleeting reaction, and it succeeds.

Poem (a) is spoilt by Wordsworthian crudity and artificiality of treatment. Within its narrow limitations, poem (b) seems to blend as a convincing whole, and for this reason it must be regarded as the superior production.

B

(a) Standing ankle-deep in wet grass,
I looked into the freshly-dug pit;
I shivered as the mist blanketed around me
Shutting me off from civilisation.

The bones, now looking like dead bits of wood,
Are the remains of some man,
Dug up to be stuck in a museum,
To be stared and wondered at.

Who was he?
How long ago did he live?
Was it two thousand, or twenty thousand years ago?
People ask.

But now, he lies,
Just a lump of bones in his open grave,
Surrounded by men and women
Who are carefully scraping the dirt from his remains.

I turn and leave.

(b) The mist formed on the hill top,
The glittering bones looked into my eyes.
I was afraid, so afraid;
These bones may have belonged to a king.
I stood there solemn and all alone
Caught in a cloud of scummy mist;
His joints were cracked, his eyes were powder
Rotting on that unearthly heath.
I thought a while, that yet one day,
One day I would have to die. Die.
Death is so immoral, but it comes to everyone.
In time, in space - where do we go?
The dirt was wet and boggy,
Puddles covered these dogs' delights,
His teeth were greyish white, like chalk or olay;
From this spot he will never move,
Silent as the night, ghostly as night.
This I felt, was it heaven or earth?
Was I dead or dreaming? Was I like him too?
Suddenly a tap reached my shoulder;
In a Startled moment I turned, hastily.
It was my friend. We walked on home.
Tomorrow, the next day, what would it hold?
Death....Tomorrow may never come. Death....
And everlasting life.....

The two poems\(^6\) have in common, that they are both modern, belonging probably to the 1920's and that both deal with the poet's reflections on the archeological

\(^{6}\) The poets remain anonymous.
discovery of some ancient human bones - with a curious similarity.

In each case the verse form is free and unrhymed. Poem one is in fact prose and could be printed consecutively without loss and perhaps with advantage. Longish sentences are cut up with short, 'deadpan' statements such as 'Who was he?' 'People ask'. 'I turn and leave.' The only point at which the poet seems at all subjective is in line 3...

'I shivered etc'. The might just imply that he felt insecure in the presence of ancient death, cut off from the psychological shelter of ordinary things by the mist. Otherwise he seems to display no more than a cursory interest or curiousity, with perhaps a little regret that the remains of what was once a man are to be 'stuck in a museum'.

Poem two is far more reflective, yet in a simple Wordsworthian way. Again there is a mist on the hill-top where the bones have been dug up, isolating the bones with the poet and his thoughts, which are of considerable range as he stands musing, until a friend startles him out of his reverie. They 'walked on home' - another psychological shelter, as in poem one - but unlike poet one, poet two walked away disturbed.

Poet two reacts from ancient death with fear. These poor remains may have belonged to a king, but we all have to come to this death, unsatisfactory ('immoral') as it may be. Speculation follows; where does the personality go after death? Has death touched those who are still alive? Life is frail. Death and eternity may come at any moment.

There is no great intellectual strength about either poem but the second certainly has more in it than the first, which fails in leaving too much to the reader.
(a) The Walking Road

The World is all orange-round:
The sea smells salt between:
The strong hills climb on their own backs,
Coloured and damascene,
Cloud-flecked and sunny-green;
Knotted and straining up,
Up, With still hands and cold:
Grip at the slipping sky,
Yet cannot hold:
Round twists old Earth, and round,
Stillness not yet found.

Plains like a flat dish, too,
Shudder and spin:
Roads in a pattern crawl
Scratched with a pin
Across the fields' dim shagreen:
- Dusty their load:
But over the craggy hills
Wanders the walking road.

Broad as the hill's broad,
Rough as the world's rough, too:
Long as the Age is long,
Ancient and true,
Swinging, and broad, and long,
Graggy, strong.

Gods sit like milestones
On the edge of the Road, by the Moon's still;
Man has feet, feet that swing, pound the high hill
Above and above, until
He stumble and widely spill
His dusty bones.

Round twists old Earth, and round,
Stillness not yet found.

Richard Hughes

(b) From "The Rock"

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit,
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O World of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,

Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ingorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance.
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

T.S. Eliot

The subject matter is the same; the world, viewed from God's incredibly lofty pinnacle. The treatment, however, is contrasting; Riohard Hughes' poem is purely existentialist, almost "dead-pan", in its age-long prehistoric atmosphere, whereas that of T.S. Eliot is a religious anti-humanist bleat. Hughes sees the eternal everyman treading the roads of earth, till "he stumble and widely spill his dusty bones"; here the allusory time-lag between "stumble" and "dusty bones" may be a millenium. Eliot sees man as paradoxically receding in wisdom as he advances in knowledge.

"Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word".
(The Word = The Word of God i.e. Jesus Christ)

St. John 1; 1

This, for Eliot, is the depressing sum of development over a millenium.

Both poems are the work of masters, and it would be presumptuous to say that one is better than the other. Clearly they both succeed in their respective intentions, and it merely remains to say which appears to be the more attractive in feeling and tone.

There is always something a little "off-putting" in a "high moral tone", Eliot drops into it. Even with faith, religious belief remains difficult to the human being
whose mind is built along the lines of

"Endless invention, endless experiment".

So why reproach him for what comes naturally? One is left with an image of a despairing theologian wringing his hands and bewailing man's remoteness from God.

"Where is the life we have lost in living?"!

Where indeed? The face is that most of us have little choice about how we live; moreover, "The endless cycle of idea and action" must surely be more meant for us than still contemplation, the prerogative of the privileged few. Undigested philosophy remains indigestible to the reader.

Hughes' poem, by contrast, has the clean selective simplicity of the great work of art. He really reflects man's evolution, the development, age-long, in which

"Gods sit like milestones",

and the weary plod of the individual through an existence which must remain, philosophically, largely inscrutable.

The weight of the "walking road" is really in the beautifully chosen expression, most of it visual. If, as a god, one sat aloft, the world would appear just so; shaped like an orange, hills like embossed linen; fields like rough, green-painted leather, hilltops with "cold hands", roads as though scratched with pins. We are also aware of the dizzy unresting effect of a world revolving against a sky, yet, in the long run, eventually slowing down to eternal silence and stillness.

There is all he has to say, and it is worth saying. How to look at the man, who, generation after generation, walks the road, is left to the reader.

D

(a) War Song of the Saracens(7)

(7) Medieval Christian designation for Moslems, especially Moslems in Europe, derived from Saraceni, an ancient Greek and Roman name for nomadic Arab tribes harassing the frontier of the Roman Empire.
We are they who come faster than fate: we are they who ride early or late:
We storm at your ivory gate: Pale Kings of the Sunset, beware!
Not on silk nor in samet we lie, not in curtained solemnity die
Among women who chatter and cry, and children who mumble a prayer.
But we sleep by the ropes of the camp, and we rise with shout, and we tramp
With the sun or the moon for a lamp, and the spray of the wind in our hair.

From the lands, where the elephants are, to the forts of Merou and Balghar,
Our steel we have brought and our star to shine on the ruins of Rum.
We have marched from the Indus to Spain, and by God we will go there again;
We have stood on the shore of the plain where the Waters of Destiny boom.
A mart of destruction we made a Jalula where men were afraid,
For death war a difficult trade, and the sword was a broker of doom;
And the Spear was a Desert Physician who cured not a few of ambition,
And drave not a few to predition with medicine bitter and strong:
And the shield was a grief to the fool and as bright as a desolate pool,
And as straight as the rock of Stamboul when their cavalry thundered along:
For the coward was drowned with the brave when our battle sheered up like a wage,
And the dead to the desert we gave, and the glory to God in our song.

James Elory Flecker

(b) The War Song of Dinas Vawr(8)

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(8) Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866) was a novelist and poet. This song robust in rhythm, comes from his novel The Misfortunes of Elphin, which is a parody of Arthurian legends.
Notice that the lines and with an unstressed syllable and call for a double (or feminine) rhyme, which adds charm to the poem.
The mountain sheep are sweeter,
But the valley sheep are fatter;
We therefore deemed it meet
To carry off the latter.
We made an expedition;
We met a host and quelled it;
We forced a strong position,
And killed the men who held it.

On Dyfed’s(9) richest valley,
Where herds of kine were browsing,
We made am mighty sally,
To furnish our carousing.
Fierce warors rushed to meet us;
We met them, and o’erthrew them:
They struggled hard to beat us;
But we conquered them, and slew them.

As we drove our prize at leisure,
The king marched forth to catch us;
His rage surpassed all measure,
But his people could not match us.
He fled to his hall-pillars;
And, ere our force we led off,
Some sacked his house and cellars,
While others cut his head off.

(9) Pembrokeshire, Wales.
We there, in strife bewildering,
Split blood enough to swim in:
We orphaned many children,
And widowed many women.
The eagles and the ravens
We glutted with our foemen;
The heroes and the cravens,
The spearmen and the bowmen.

We brought away from battle,
And much their land bemoaned them,
Two thousand head of cattle,
and the head of him whe owned them:
Ednyfed, King of Dyfed,
His head was borne before us;
His wine and beasts supplied our feasts,
And his overthrow our chorus.

Thomas Love Peacock

Neither poem aims at anything particularly great neither in fact rises above mediocrity. But as Peacock was primarily a satiric-novelist and song-writer of the first half of the 19th Century and Flecker a dramatist, their versification was secondary in each case. Both oddly enough were civil servants, a century apart in time, and this rather docile pursuit may account for the bloodthirsty nature of their curiously similar themes. No solider or man of action could ever have written so unfeelingly and unconvincingly about violence.
Peacock is a satirist and a wit. The impression conveyed by Dinas Yawr is that he is poking fun at the hero because he is Welsh. The lilting, sing-song tones of the Welshman are parodied in the strict metre and the false accentuation of the weak endings.

sweeter fatter expedition

There is also a neatness, as of a slick joke. Taking the first quatrain, with its pun 'meeter - meater - or meatier.' we observe the humour of a piece of slapstick. The rest of the poem is rather uninteresting. It is 'deadpan' in its calm assertion of 'woe to the vanquished, unfeeling in its impersonal description of carnage and theft, almost gleeful in the final crowing over the conquered.

'And his overthrow, our chorus'.

We are left with the impression of a greedy little tyrant heading his band or murderous cut-throats and winning a bloody little war. The story is devoid of interest, explanation and humanity. It contains no imagery and offers evidence of poetic ability. It is simply nest verse, little removed from doggerel.

There is more merit in the Flecker, which paints a similar story of theft, murder and carnage on a broader canvas and with a more suggestive brush.

Swift strokes indicate the tough, ruthless, hard-riding, marauding Saracen band. The 'ivory gate' suggests the Eastern potentate, the 'Pale Kings of the Sunset', those of Europe. Lines 3 and 4 offer the contrast between life, lived society in the palace, and life lived in the saddle. Line 6 (Stanza 1) - 'the spray of the wind' - condenses the picture of hordes spurring along a sea-shore of cliff. Stanza 2 continues in the same vein.

Are Saracen marauders better than Welsh marauders? At least the Moslems give the glory to God and not to themselves. And although profitable enough, their invasions were no doubt in the name of the 'Holy War'.

'.....and the glory to God in our song'
contrasts with

'...and his overthrow, our chorus'.

The inappropriate metre of the Peacock is again in contrast with the suggestive movement of the Flecker - uu-uu-uu - suggests the hoofbeats of perpetually galloping horses.

The imagery of the Flecker is worthy of notice. It is largely metaphor, resolving itself into neat, short images.....

'Faster than fate' - 'curtained solemnity' - 'steel....star' (meaning swords and Moslem symbols). The alliteration is noticeable. 'The swords was a broker of doom',

'And the spear was a desert physician who cured not a few of ambiton'.

There is a measure of poetic imagination which elevates Flecker's ballad rather above the Peacock, but, regrettably, neither set is much better than ordinary verses.

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