
GOOD AND BAD POETRY: A COMPARISON OF TWO POEMS

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Most poems try to recreate an experience of some sort. Whether or not they do this successfully is usually determined by reference to their integrity of language. 'This is a very happy event' or 'I am very sad' are not statements which arouse much feeling in the reader, even though the poet who makes them is entirely sincere in his statement. What matters is whether the feeling of sadness or happiness is recreated in the mind of the reader by the power of the words on the page.

This can be demonstrated by a consideration of two poems. The first, 'By the Statue of King Charles at Charing Cross', is often found in anthologies. It is by Lionel Johnson, who was born in Broadstairs, Kent, in 1867. Educated at Winchester and New College, Oxford, he became a literary journalist and critic in London and died in 1902. Here is the poem:

Sombre and rich, the skies,
Great glooms, and starry plains;
Gently the night wind sighs;
Else a vast silence reigns.

5 The splendid silence clings
Around me: and around
The saddest of all Kings,
Crown'd, and again discrown'd.

10 Comely and calm, he rides
Hard by his own Whitehall.
Only the night wind glides:
No crowds, nor rebels, brawl.

15 Gone, too, his Court: and yet,
The stars his courtiers are:
Stars in their stations set;
And every wandering star.

- Alone he rides, alone,
The fair and fatal King:
Dark night is all his own,
20 That strange and solemn thing.
- Which are more full of fate,
The stars; or those sad eyes?
Which are more still and great:
Those brows, or the dark skies?
- 25 Although his whole heart yearn
In passionate tragedy,
Never was face so stern
With sweet austerity.
- Vanquish'd in life, his death
30 By beauty made amends:
The passing of his breath
Won his defeated ends.
- Brief life, and hapless? Nay:
Through death, life grew sublime.
35 *Speak after sentence?* Yea:
And to the end of time.
- Armour'd he rides, his head
Bare to the stars of doom;
He triumphs now, the dead,
40 Beholding London's gloom.
- Our wearier spirit faints,
Vex'd in the world's employ:
His soul was of the saints;
And art to him was joy.
- 45 King, tried in fires of woe!
Men hunger for thy grace:
And through the night I go,
Loving thy mournful face.
- Yet, when the city sleeps,
50 When all the cries are still,
The stars and heavenly deeps
Work out a perfect will.

The poem is a meditation upon the character and fate of Charles I. The statue at Charing Cross is, to the poet's eye, representative of Charles's ultimate victory over his enemies: his memorial speaks of his triumph and will do so 'to the end of time'. The great king, artistic, graceful, divine, in his triumph and splendour is contrasted with the duller world of 'London's gloom' and its weary inhabitants worn down by 'the world's employ'. The poet grieves at the sad fate of the king, but, in the last stanza, suggests that human destiny is shaped by vast, significant, and unknown forces. 'The stars and heavenly deeps/Work out a perfect will.'

In feeling and tone the poem is romantic, melancholic, elegaic. The rather strained claims for Charles's greatness are shown in the extravagant statement 'The stars his courtiers are' and in the overblown rhetorical questions which comprise the sixth stanza. This striving after effect is continued in the somewhat facile oxymorons of the seventh verse. Even so, there is a pleasing sense of quiet and peacefulness contained in words such as 'sighs', 'Comely and calm', 'alone', 'sad'. And there is some movement from darkness and solemnity to an idea of triumph. The poet aims at grandeur in the moralistic ending of the last four lines. Overall, however, the reader is inclined to find here a poem impressed with its own music. It certainly doesn't say much for so many verses, and despite the poet's claim 'through the night I go/Loving thy mournful face', one feels the poem is 'made' rather than felt.

The verse form consists of a string of quatrains rhyming *abab* in regular iambic trimeters with the occasional trochee for variety at the start of a line. There is very little enjambement, so that the flow of the poem is largely confined to the unit of sense within pairs of lines in each stanza. Furthermore, the verses drift in loose connection without a tightly progressive structure: a number of verses could be omitted without causing damage to the poem. Indeed, it might even be improved in this way. The consciously artistic effects – for example, the repetition of 'alone' in line 17 and the alliteration of lines 18, 20, and 21 – amount to little more than verbal tricks. The rhetorical questions of lines 21-24 are meaningless. At best their intended answer brings the poet into conflict with the resolution of the last verse. The posed questions of lines 33 and 35 are answered with some emphasis, 'Nay' and 'Yea' being in strong positions at the end of the lines, but the effect is still contrived – like the apostrophe of line 45. The exclamation is supposed to add weight to the

sentiment. In fact, it exposes a very ordinary metaphor. The compression of 'No crowds, nor rebels, brawl./Gone, too, his Court' shows a keener awareness of the need to shape and control the language.

Images in the poem seldom rise above the level of cliché. The wind 'sighs' and 'glides', the silence 'reigns' like a king but also 'clings' in rather undignified fashion, and there seems to be no imaginative or logical basis for calling the stars 'his courtiers', then 'stars of doom', and finally suggesting that 'The stars and heavenly deeps' are responsible for carrying through some vast, omnipotent design. 'Dark night' is a commonplace metaphor for death, even if it is 'strange and solemn'. The trial by fire in line 45 is similarly unconvincing. The skies, the night, and the night wind make too many appearances in the poem. Reference to the stars, which are invoked on seven occasions, is also overworked. Johnson is striving after effect, making the reader work upon the poem rather than the poem work upon the reader. Sentimental, sloppy in its use of language, largely empty – not a good poem.

The second poem is by Edward Thomas who was born in London on 3 March 1878 and was killed in action at the battle of Arras on 9 April 1917. His poetry, all of it written in the two years 1914-16, is remarkable for introspective musings on the meaning of nature and the purpose and quality of human life. 'The Sun Used to Shine' is a good example:

The sun used to shine while we two walked
 Slowly together, paused and started
 Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked
 As either pleased, and cheerfully parted

5 Each night. We never disagreed
 Which gate to rest on. The to be
 And the late past we gave small heed.
 We turned from men or poetry

To rumours of the war remote
 10 Only till both stood disinclined
 For aught but the yellow flavoured coat
 Of an apple wasps had undermined;

Or a sentry of dark betonies
 The stateliest of small flowers on earth,
 15 At the forest verge; or crocuses
 Pale purple as if they had their birth

In sunless Hades fields. The war
 Came back to mind with the moonrise
 Which soldiers in the east afar
 20 Beheld then. Nevertheless, our eyes

Could as well imagine the Crusades
 Or Caesar's battles. Everything
 To faintness like those rumours fades –
 Like the brooks' water glittering

25 Under the moonlight – like those walks
 Now – like us two that took them, and
 The fallen apples, all the talks
 And silences – like memory's sand

When the tide covers it late or soon,
 30 And other men through other flowers
 In those fields under the same moon
 Go talking and have easy hours.

In 'The Sun Used to Shine' the poet looks back on past, pleasant walks with his friend (Robert Frost) and their discussions on 'men or poetry', war, and nature. As the poem progresses, persistent thoughts of war cast shadows over their talk and lead Thomas to recognize that, although 'the war/Came back to mind', it is as remote from their experience as 'the Crusades/Or Caesar's battles.' In turn, he contemplates the impermanence of everything. All 'To faintness...fades'. Everything significant is also transient. It fades and is eventually erased by time.

In feeling and tone the poem is peaceful, quiet, reflective. Despite the sunny first line and diction which suggests contentment ('pleased', 'cheerfully', 'never', 'disagreed') and the imagined, future 'easy hours' of other men and the end of the poem, the background of war is a disturbing influence and overall the poem creates a feeling of melancholy. There is an awareness of the plight of the soldiers – compare another of Thomas's poems, 'The Owl', where this awareness is more explicitly presented – and the friendship shared

in the opening verses gives way to a more solitary regret that 'Everything/To faintness like those rumours fades'.

On the surface, the verse form of the poem is conventional: quatrains, rhyming *abab*, with mostly regular lines of eight syllables in iambic metre. But this formality of structure is subjected to Thomas's masterful skill in creating natural, flowing speech. Virtually all of the poem's lines are run-on and all stanzas without exception carry over into the next verse. The effects of this is to create the spontaneous flow of a speaking voice, with the meaning spilling over into each succeeding verse and carrying the reader onwards, the freer speech-rhythms being finely counterpointed by the rhyme and formal arrangement of the verse. The construction of the first two stanzas, with their run-on lines and pauses within lines (2, 3, 4, 5, and 6), recreates the pausing and starting movements of the two friends. A pleasing variety of structure is introduced in lines 5-6 and 20-22, where short sentences, which make their point succinctly, are introduced in contrast to the much longer sentences which form the main body of the poem. In the long sentences of lines 8-17 and 22-32, the use of alternatives in 'but...Or...or' and the linking of similes in parallel ('like those rumours', 'Like the brooks' water', 'like those walks', 'like us two', 'like memory's sand') enable the poet to illustrate his meaning with a series of examples within the framework of a clear design.

There is surprisingly little imagery in the poem. Of note are 'undermined' and 'sentry', applied to fruit and flowers but suggestive of military enterprise, and 'sunless Hades fields', a phrase suggesting darkness and death: a menacing contrast to the beginning of the poem and, indeed, to the flowers' 'birth'. The crocuses themselves are rooted in death. The diction is drawn largely from nature: the detail of an apple and wasps, flowers, the forest verge, the moon-rise, the brooks' water, sand, and the tide; and there are telling contrasts of colour – yellow, dark, pale purple, glittering moonlight. The simile 'like memory's sand' is elaborated in the last stanza to signify that in time even cherished memories recede into oblivion.

'The Sun Used to shine' is a perfect evocation of a moment in time (August 1914). Simple, unremarkable events, a country walk and talk, are recorded with fidelity and sensitivity, and, in the more complex reflections to which these events give rise, nothing is overstated or contrived. With unobtrusive artistry Edward Thomas deals with real experience and the paradoxes such experience often contains. The

concluding lines are gently and tentatively balanced by opposing senses of continuity and loss.

Here, then, is the essential difference between the two poems. Johnson's poem is made in an 'art for art's sake' way. Its obvious and artificial poetic designs intrude upon the reader and damage his response to the words on the page. In contrast, Edward Thomas has recreated his experience in the mind of his readers, so that the poet's thoughts and feelings come alive each time we read the poem. We share his experience and feel we are there in that time and place, each time the poem is read.