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The Melancholy Pleasures of Poetry

Kenneth O. ANDERSON

W. H. Auden は詩それ自体がもつ意図は、真実を語り幻想や自己欺瞞から人間を解き放つ事であると主張する。このような詩が語る真実は、時には苦痛で堪え難いものであり、時には精神を高揚させ浄化する作用があり、又陰性的感情を一掃しそのような感情を建設的な方向へと向ける事を可能にする。しかも危害を与えるものや、私達を圧倒するかもしれないものからの距離を私達に与えてくれる。辛辣なユーモアもその兵器庫の中には備えられている。詩は勇気を出すために恐怖心を振り払おうと暗闇で口笛を吹いている行為であり、正にそれは平静さを回復し、人生の最も小さな事を褒め称える事である。

“Poetry is not magic. In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate.” (*Auden, The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays, 1962*)

The pleasures of poetry are many: verbal dexterity, felicity of phrase, arresting tropes, and so on. But one of the greatest pleasures lies in our recognition of the truth(s) that poetry expresses, truth hard-won and based on an awareness of right and wrong. A truth-telling poem can become a touchstone for us, something to come back to repeatedly for reassurance and comfort.

The truth of some poems, however, is not so comfortable; in fact, it can make us flinch because it is so hard to bear. The pleasure of such a poem is much more bitter and may be hard to swallow. Here is an example by Roger McGough (1987):

The Jogger's Song

After leaving the Harp nightclub in Deptford, a 35-year-old-woman was raped and assaulted by two men in Fordham Park. Left in a shocked and dishevelled state she ap-

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pealed for help to a man in a light-coloured tracksuit who was out jogging. Instead of rescuing her, he also raped her.

Standard, 27 January 1984

Well, she was asking for it.
Lyin there, cryin out,
Dyin for it. Pissed of course.
Of course, nice girls don't.
Don't know who she was,
Where from, didn't care.
Nor did she. Slut. Slut.

Now I look after myself. Fit.
Keep myself fit. Got
A good body. Good body. Slim.
Go to the gym. Keep in trim.
Girls like a man wiv a good body.
Strong arms, tight arse. Right
tart she was. Slut. Pissed.

Now I don't drink. No fear.
Like to keep a clear
head. Keep ahead. Like
I said, like to know what I'm doin
Who I'm screwin (excuse language).
Not like her. Baggage. Half-
Dressed, couldn't care less. Pissed.

Crawlin round beggin for it.
Lying there, dyin for it.
Cryin. Cryin. Nice girls don't.
Right one she was. A raver.
At night, after dark,
On her own, in the park?

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Well, do me a favour.

And tell me this:

If she didn't enjoy it,

Why didn't she scream?

The effect of this poem on the reader is almost visceral in its depiction of the horror of a man who could be so arrogant and blind as to not recognize a plea for help, but take advantage of it. Conceivably the man didn't want to recognize the woman's plight because such recognition would get in the way of his own desires—for sexual gratification? Revenge on women? A craving for violence? Perhaps all three.

The language of the poem tells us that the speaker is British, perhaps—but not necessarily—working class (e.g., the pronunciation of “with” as “wiv”, “pissed” for “drunk”, “arse” for “ass”, the British word “raver” meaning, in the words of the OED, “a person with a wild or uninhibitedly pleasure-seeking lifestyle”, the expression “do me a favour” where an American might say “Give me a break”). The question is, who is the man speaking to? Himself? To his pals in a pub? To the police who have found and arrested him? It could be any of these. If to himself, it could be an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to justify his actions and exonerate himself. The woman wasn't a victim, she was a hardened slut who wanted to be raped and liked it—a potent and dangerous male fantasy. If to his pals, it could still be self-justification mixed with braggadocio, “proof” of his masculinity and of how some women (all women?), with their sluttish desires, are despicable. It is a way of making himself feel superior at a weaker person's expense, an example of bullying. If the speech is to police who have arrested him, it is, again, an attempt at self-justification and avoidance of criminal prosecution.

McGough has masterfully conveyed the rhythms of natural speech to reveal the nature of the speaker of the poem without having to explain. We grasp the significance of the poem through the speaker's words even though he himself is unaware of what he is revealing about himself. Although his words are intended to elude admiration or sympathy, they have the opposite effect, in the reader, of instilling horror and repugnance. It is sobering to realize the potential for evil that lies in human beings and to be reduced to saying, as Kurtz did, “The horror! The horror!”

So McGough's poem is an attempt to express the inexpressible, to make us see the horror and pity of the situation between the lines. Even then, technique creeps in—the end rhymes of “slim” and “trim”, “fear” and “clear”, “raver” and “favour”, “doin” and the internal rhyme “screw in”, for instance—and irony, in the use of the word “song” in the title, as if the jogger's words were a love song, not a bar-

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baric shout, and in the fact that the speaker apologizes for his vulgar language while making no excuse for his brutality. Art is protection for us from what is unbearable, a way of distancing ourselves from the unspeakable to prevent it from overwhelming us. Poetic technique and irony are ways of expressing an emotion that might otherwise reduce us to silence, and the poem itself is a reminder to be on guard and to keep our sense of values sharp.

Fortunately, not all poems need to be brutal, even if they are sad or melancholy in tone. They can uplift, offer catharsis, purge negative emotion and bring light into a dark situation. One of the finest examples of such a poem, for me, is Barry Spacks' "Essence" (Spacks, 1982):

A hummingbird taps at my window, stirred
By reflected lilacs, seductively blurred
In the glass. Astray from
An actual blossom
He'll yearn for this other
Spirit-flower,
Mirrored beauty
Surpassing sense;
Idea only;
Ache of romance.

The hummingbird represents, for me, the human tendency to desire dream over reality, to prefer the ideal to what really exists. It can be a selfish tendency in that it can lead one to reject or destroy the real for the illusory, following a will-o'-the-wisp which leads to nothing—e.g., the tendency, out of dissatisfaction or boredom with one's spouse, to "trade up" in the attempt to get what seems to be a better or superior partner—thus, the acquiring of a "trophy wife" (or a "trophy husband", for that matter, although it may be significant in the poem that the hummingbird is a "he"). Divorce, child custody battles, disputes over alimony and property rights—all these heartaches and headaches are brought on by human selfishness and the inability to distinguish the illusory from the genuine.

Human creativity is another example of where the search for the ideal can result in a great deal of unhappiness. In art, the search for the ideal is, initially, a noble one; as Robert Browning said, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" But the search of a creative artist for perfection in the work can be a very demanding one, leading one to discard or sacrifice other people in order to develop the art. Is such art, even great art, worth the pain and suffering caused to other people? This is a very difficult question.

Not only in art, but in any human endeavor, the desire to achieve an ideal can cost a great deal of

pain to others as well as to oneself. Nevertheless, the constant striving for meaning, the attempt to go beyond limits and find a higher plane is inherent in human beings—the essence of what it is to be human, as the title of the poem implies.

I am reading these meanings into the poem, and I believe rightly, but of course there are many other levels of meaning to be found in it. This is one of the great mysteries and attractions of poetry—the way in which a reader creates, or recreates, the meaning of a poem, bringing personal experience to bear on the reading and finding meanings that apply to him or her alone, as well as those which apply to all.

It is melancholy to realize the potential for destructiveness in humans in their tendency to never be satisfied, to be always wishing for what they cannot have, for what may not even exist. Yet reading the poem, and realizing anew the dangers of this tendency, is therapeutic. It helps to raise or restore our consciousness of human frailty and to be on guard against it in ourselves. And the poem says what it says so beautifully, with such art, that the melancholy in fact becomes pleasurable—as one feels pleasure in listening to a sad song because the music is so beautiful.

“Essence” is written in irregular meter, but with some regularly metrical lines: The first line is regular iambic pentameter, while the sixth, seventh and last lines are trochaic dimeter (although in the last line the second trochee is inverted into an iamb). The other lines are irregular in their meter, but all sound pleasing to the ear, musical. There is end rhyme, the rhyme scheme of which is *a/a/b/b/c/c/d/d/e/d/e*. In other words, the first two lines are a couplet, the second two lines are another couplet, the third lines are also a couplet (but with approximate end-rhyme), while the last four lines are a quatrain with alternate rhymes. This poetic finesse brings out the music of the lines when the poem is read aloud.

The metaphor of the hummingbird is vivid, and in fact I have witnessed a similar incident, of a bird trying to fly into a house but being flummoxed by the unexpected fact of a glass window barring the way. The hummingbird is “stirred” by the reflection of the lilacs in the glass. This can be taken as an actual stir of instinct toward a flower, or as anthropomorphic, demonstrating the human attraction to physical beauty. The lilacs are “seductively” blurred: Who is doing the seducing? Is it a case of natural design seducing the hummingbird, or of the hummingbird seducing himself in his search for the impossible? The fact that the lilacs are “blurred” indicates to us that not only is the reflection of the lilacs actually unclear, but that the hummingbird doesn’t see clearly that the flowers he desires are not real. He is astray both literally and figuratively, and, even if he eventually gives up trying to attain the essence of the unreal flowers, he will continue to yearn for them, as the spiritual image surpasses what can be actually, physically sensed and attained. The poem goes from “lilacs” (flowers in

the plural) to the singularity of “spirit-flower”—the flowers have become an archetype. The beauty of the flowers is “mirrored” in the (looking) glass, and one thinks of Lewis Carroll’s looking-glass country where values are inverted and all the elements conspire to mock the real world from which one has come. We are left with an ache which will not go away, the ache of “romance”. A wealth of meanings can be read into the word “romance”, but one of them must surely be the human longing to see the world as it is not, more beautiful than the one that exists, and free of its sufferings and complexities.

“Essence” is a wonderful title for the poem, encompassing as it does both the actual, physical essence of a flower which a bird or bee seeks and the essence of what it is to be human. It is also the essence of the poet’s thought, distilled into a few lines which lure one with their heady potency.

Delmore Schwartz’s poem “I Am to My Own Heart Merely a Serf” (Schwartz, 1967) is a poem about personal longing to be free of illusion, personal frustration at the inability to realize one’s own hopes and dreams. Written in loose blank verse, its smooth, stately cadences mask the meter of the poem as it builds to its despairing conclusion:

I am to my own heart merely a serf
And follow humbly as it glides with autos
And come attentive when it is too sick,
In the bad cold of sorrow much too weak,
To drink some coffee, light a cigarette
And think of summer beaches, blue and gay.
I climb the sides of buildings just to get
Merely a gob of gum, all that is left
Of its infatuation of last year.
Being the servant of incredible assumption,
Being to my own heart merely a serf.

I have been sick of its cruel rule, as sick
As one is sick of chewing gum all day;
Only inside of sleep did all my anger
Spend itself, restore me to my role,
Comfort me, bring me to the morning
Willing and smiling, ready to be of service,
To box its shadows, lead its brutish dogs,

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Knowing its vanity the vanity of waves.

But when sleep too is crowded, when sleep too
Is full of chores impossible and heavy,
The looking for white doors whose numbers are
Different and equal, that is, infinite,
The carriage of my father on my back,
Last summer, 1910, and my own people,
The government of love's great polity,
The choice of taxes, the production
Of clocks, of lights, and horses, the location
Of monuments, of hotels, and of rhyme,
Then, then, in final anger, I wake up!
Merely wake up once more,

once more to resume

The unfed hope, the unfed animal,
Being the servant of incredible assumption,
Being to my own heart merely a serf.

The chief metaphor in this poem, of course, is of the heart as absolute ruler, with the corollary of the speaker as the serf in thrall to his heart. Only in sleep does the speaker find release from his master (as Shakespeare says, in "Sleep that knits up the ravel'd sleeve of care"); yet even the realm of sleep is invaded by the heart, which disturbs the unconscious mind with "chores impossible and heavy"; thoughts of its own finiteness in the face of infinity; burdens inherited from parents; the burden of history and "my people"—in Schwartz's case, the Jews; the burden of taxes; the burden of love for another or others; the burdens of the consciousness of the passing of time, of facts to be remembered, of the striving for art in poetry—until the speaker cannot sleep any more, but wakes up raging for a final confrontation with the demands of the heart.

Which cannot be. The speaker is doomed to remain unfed, perpetually frustrated, led astray over and over again by his own desires and illusions, a slave forever to his heart.

It seems as if Schwartz was rehearsing his own fate in this poem. Although in later poems he celebrated "summer knowledge" ("the knowledge of the truth of love and the truth of growing," as he says in his poem "Summer Knowledge"), he eventually became mentally ill, lost his friends, ruined his academic career and, in July 1966, died alone, of a heart attack, in a Broadway hotel (Schwartz, 1967).

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Hart Crane similarly seems to be anticipating his own fate in his poem “Repose of Rivers” (Sanders, et. al., 1970):

The willows carried a slow sound,
A sarabande the wind mowed on the mead.
I could never remember
That seething, steady leveling of the marshes
Till age had brought me to the sea.

Flags, weeds. And remembrance of steep alcoves
Where cypresses shared the noon's
Tyranny; they drew me into hades almost.
And mammoth turtles climbing sulphur dreams
Yielded, while sun-silt rippled them
Asunder...

How much I would have bartered! the black gorge
And all the singular nesting in the hills
Where beavers learn stitch and tooth.
The pond I entered once and quickly fled—
I remember now its singing willow rim.

And finally, in that memory all things nurse;
After the city that I finally passed
With scalding unguents spread and smoking darts
The monsoon cut across the delta
At gulf gates...There, beyond the dykes

I heard wind flaking sapphire, like this summer,
And willows could not hold more steady sound.

In this poem the speaker reviews his life as a journey from water (“the memory all things nurse” of the watery safety of the womb) back to water, toward the sea, where at last he finds rest and peace once more. The sound he hears when he arrives at the sea, wind over water, makes him remember the soothing sound of wind through willows in his childhood: a sound with the stately, calming quality

of a sarabande as if played by the wind mowing through the meadow (called “mead” not only to emphasize the stately, formal quality of both the music and the movement of the wind, but also to ensure that the second line of the poem, written in iambic pentameter, ends emphatically). He had forgotten this steady sound, lost it, in the turbulence of growing up. This sound of the wind is represented as the “seething, steady leveling of the marshes,” an interesting turn of phrase: The sound is steady and calm, yet intensely active, energetic, “seething” in a positive way—teeming with ideas, bursting with energy. The sound is also representative of death: The wind mows, levels, lays low the marshes. Death is seen as both frightening and welcome, a release into another, higher plane of existence.

The imagery of growing up in the next section of the poem is also connected with death, but death as punishment in the underworld: hot, sulphurous, at the mercy of tyrants, a place where giant sea turtles, in trying to return to the sea (after going ashore to lay their eggs?), are overwhelmed and split into pieces. How much, the speaker says, he would have bartered—bartered for what? Bartered, perhaps, for the sake of a home where he felt secure and wanted (the pond that he “entered once and quickly fled” because it could never give him the real security he craved). What would he have bartered? His natural inclinations, perhaps—Crane was homosexual in a time when most homosexuals had to lead a double life to protect themselves, and his father was “largely hostile to his literary interests” (Sanders). In addition, he was an alcoholic. No, security was not to be found in the life of the pond: The calm serenity of the singing willows was to be found outside, on the rim of the pond.

No security either, in the city he fled to after leaving the pond: It is a place of “scalding unguents” and “smoking darts,” a place both morally and physically polluted. It is only after he leaves the city that he arrives where “the monsoon cut across the delta,” as the wind had cut across the marshes. He is alone, away from humankind, and only then does he find the tranquility he craves. As he reaches the sea, the poem ends on a note of calm but exultant triumph, in a couplet written in iambic pentameter (in contrast to the irregular meter which has come before), and the sound of those two lines, when read aloud, achieve that musical state of grace which all poetry strives for:

I heard flaking sapphire, like this summer,
And willows could not hold more steady sound.

Crane did indeed end his life in water: He “committed suicide by leaping from [a] ship in [the] Gulf of Mexico on [a] homeward voyage” (Sanders). Both he and Schwartz wrote beautifully of summer and of summer knowledge, yet in the end both were undone by life and died tragically.

Such knowledge of the poets’ lives adds depth to the melancholy of the poems themselves. It is especially melancholy to realize that the power they had to turn their own melancholy into beautiful,

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powerful poetry could not, ultimately, save them from self-destruction. It gives the reader pause.

Yet we who read the poems can still learn from their poems, find pleasure in their melancholy lines, without agreeing to their melancholy fate. The poems can make us realize that the vicissitudes of life can be dealt with, can be faced down, can be alchemized into pure gold. For poetry is a vision that can be shared by both those who write and those who read: It is a way of looking at anything the world has to offer with interest, intensity, and curiosity, turning loss into gain and darkness into light. It is a way of distancing ourselves, for awhile, from the world so that, renewed, we can come back to the struggle with renewed vision and energy.

In Richard Wilbur's "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World" (Wilbur, 1988), the soul of the speaker of the poem is aware of the bitter, melancholy state of the world and wishes to escape it, yet ruefully accepts the responsibility for living in the world as long as one can and attempt to make it a better place through love. The title of the poem is taken from St. Augustine's *Confessions*, of which Wilbur says (Hill, 1995), "Plato, St. Teresa and the rest of us in our degree have known that it is painful to return to the cave, to the earth, to the quotidian; Augustine says that it is love that brings us back." Wilbur also states:

...I'm the sort of Christian animal for whom celebration is the most important thing of all. I know that...there is terror in my poems, not so much presented as a tangible scariness but as a feeling that the order of things is in peril or in doubt, that there are holes in things through which one might drop for a long distance. The terror is there and it's countered continually by trust and by hope, by an impulse to praise. When I go to church, what doesn't particularly interest me is the Creed, although I find that I can say it. The Creed strikes me as very much like a political platform of some sort, and I believe that's what it was. What I respond to is, "Lift up your hearts!" It's lines like that in the Mass that belong to me, belong to my kind of religious experience.

Here is the poem itself, which Wilbur reads beautifully on *In Their Own Voices: A Century of Recorded Poetry* (Rhino Records Inc., 1996), for those who would like to listen to the poem as well as read it:

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple
As false dawn.

Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.

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Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,
Some are in smocks but truly there they are.
Now they are rising together in calm swells
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
With the deep joy of impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden
They swoop down into so rapt a quiet
That nobody seems to be there.

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,
From the punctual rape of every blessed day,
And cries,

“Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.”

Yet as the sun acknowledges
With a warm look the world's hunks and colors,
The soul descends once more in bitter love
To accept the waking body, saying now
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,

“Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;
Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating
Of dark habits,

Keeping their difficult balance.”

The man in this poem is awakened by the sound of the pulleys outside and the pulling open of his

eyelids is implicitly compared to the pulling of the pulleys. The squeak or groan of the pulleys is a “cry,” as if in protest at being disturbed and forced to work; in the same way, the man—and by extension his eyes—are disturbed at being awakened from innocent sleep back into this fallen world. The man is half-asleep, on the border between sleep and wakefulness; his soul is equally on the border, unwilling to re-enter the world but unable to refuse, having been “spirited from sleep” (by the call to consciousness in the body). At this moment the soul is still free from disturbing reality, but this freedom is as short-lived as false dawn before the real dawn. It hangs over the scene of the clothesline outside, below, as the first part of the fourth line of the first stanza hangs over the second half of the line.

Outside and below, “the morning air is all awash with angels” filling the clothes on the clothesline and moving them. Is it the angels moving the clothes or the wind? It is both. We cannot see the wind, but we feel its effects; similarly, perhaps, angels are invisible to us, but they can have an effect on our lives. They move together in “calm swells/ Of halcyon feeling:” The *OED* says that “halcyon” was the Greek for “kingfisher” and also a combination of two words meaning “sea” and “conceiving,” and that the halcyon was “a bird said by the ancients to breed in a nest floating on the sea around the time of the winter solstice, and to charm the wind and waves so that the sea was calm for this purpose.” The angels, therefore, also have power over nature. They take “deep joy” (deep, perhaps, in that it surpasses human understanding as well as being unbounded) in filling the clothes by means of the movement of their breath i.e. their exhalation, and their breathing is “impersonal:” perhaps because angels are neither male nor female, but also because their goodness is partial and unbiased.

The movement of the angels is like the movement of wind, but also of water: e.g. “swells,” “moving and staying like white water.” They are awesome, even frightening, in their ability to be everywhere at once, yet each one an individual keeping its own place in their flight: a paradox. The movement of the wind suddenly ceases; the angels suddenly no longer seem to be there. The pure moment, the false dawn is about to cease.

The soul knows this, and thus shrinks from “the punctual rape of every blessed day” (the accent over “blessed” makes it seem archaic, as if from a mass, and also is important in the the rhythm of the line), asking God and/or the angels to protect the world from being soiled again, and that all on earth be “clear” (not hidden, deceptive or unfathomable) in the sight of heaven. The wish is not granted, yet the soul, in conceding defeat, is aware that life on earth is difficult precisely because it is not clear, and because the relation of good to evil is complex: The world, unclean as it is, is yet “acknowledged” warmly by the sun, and the soul accepts its place in the body with love, even if that love is bitter. The voice of the soul changes as it re-inhabits the body—because it is beyond human detection?

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because it is dependent on the body? because the man himself is now conscious and takes over the speaking of words? The man—and his soul—realize that one must live in this world, not escape from it, and realize that clothes will be taken down from their “ruddy gallows” to be re-soiled, to be worn by people who look clean but are inwardly soiled, or whose innocence will be destroyed, or who must—like nuns, servants of God—struggle to keep their balance in this treacherous world and be able to walk in a way which seeks to emulate the floating of angels.

“Love Calls Us to the Things of This World” acknowledges the world’s darkness, yet its tone is one of exaltation, of hope, of knowledge that the struggle toward goodness in an imperfect world is in itself uplifting and ennobling. The sheer beauty and complexity of the lines of the poem, their sounds, convey a feeling of calmness, of radiance, which uplifts the reader despite the darkness of the message.

Wilbur is not only a great poet, he is a great translator. One of his translations is one of the most melancholy poems about love ever written, and one of the most beautiful: Apollinaire’s “Le Pont Mirabeau.” Although one can find it in Wilbur’s *New and Collected Poems* by itself, one can find, and compare it with, the French original in *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (Auster, ed., 1982). I do not, alas, have enough proficiency in French to appraise and appreciate the original as it deserves to be (although I can appreciate the beauty of the lines, especially as set to music by Leo Ferré and sung by Yvette Giraud), but I believe Wilbur’s translation is a great poem in itself, whatever may have been lost in translation:

Under the Mirabeau Bridge there flows the Seine

Must I recall

Our loves recall how then

After each sorrow joy came back again

Let night come on bells end the day

The days go by me still I stay

Hands joined and face to face let’s stay just so

While underneath

The bridge of our arms shall go

Weary of endless looks the river’s flow

Let night come on bells end the day

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The days go by me still I stay

All love goes by as water to the sea

All love goes by

How slow life seems to me

How violent the hope of love can be

Let night come on bells end the day

The days go by me still I stay

The days the weeks pass by beyond our ken

Neither time past

Nor love comes back again

Under the Mirabeau Bridge there flows the Seine

Let night come on bells end the day

The days go by me still I stay

One of the first thing one notices is how different the style of this poem is from the formal elegance of many of Wilbur's own poems. There is no punctuation, but it isn't necessary—if one reads the poem aloud, one finds that its rhythm and flow are completely natural, that it, in effect, reads itself. With its repeated refrain, it is really like a pop song (for example, Todd Rundgren's "Boat on the Charles," another song of lost love also centered around a river, the Charles River in Boston). The power of the poem stems from this very simplicity: It is an authentic *cri du coeur*:

The poem is the lament of a lover whose love has forsaken him (for the sake of convenience I will refer to the lover as "he," though in fact it could be either a man or a woman). He knows that neither the past or lost love can return, yet he cannot bring himself to face that fact: He persists in waiting for his lover at their old rendezvous, even though the river keeps flowing by and the sound of bells continues to end each day. He would like to forget and move on—"Must I recall how then/ After each sorrow joy came back again"—but knows that the answer is "yes," he must, despite his best efforts to relinquish the past. He would like to have frozen time, to "stay just so" while the river, emblematic of time, the enemy of love (thus weary of the "endless" looks of lovers and wishing to destroy them), flowed beneath the bridge of their arms; but their bridge was frail and all too human,

doomed to fail and break apart. Now, though life rushes on all around him, each moment of his unhappiness seems to drag on interminably (“How slow life seems to me”), and he continues to be torn apart by the violence of his impossible hope that his lover will come back to him.

I loved this poem before I ever knew anything about Apollinaire, but knowing the poem made me want to find out about him. And eventually I did, in the late Francis Steegmuller’s superb biography, *Apollinaire: Poet Among the Painters* (Steegmuller, 1963/1986). The story behind the poem was also melancholy: Steegmuller writes that “It seems incontestable that Marie Laurencin [the painter who loved and then left Apollinaire and for whom “Le Pont Mirabeau” was written] was the woman with whom Apollinaire had the most complete physical and spiritual relationship, and that her desertion of him was a traumatic experience that certainly influenced the course of his subsequent affairs” (page 257). Oliver Bernard, in his own translation of Apollinaire’s poems, *Apollinaire: Selected Poems* (Bernard, trans., 1965) mentions Apollinaire’s “deep sad voice” in his recording of the poem, which, Bernard says, is “obtainable from the Musee de la Parole, Rue des Bernardins, Paris Ve”.

It is questionable whether Apollinaire ever really got over the loss of Marie Laurencin, especially as he was only 38 when he died. Yet after his loss he in turn broke the heart of another, Madeleine Pages, to whom he wrote love letters from the front when a soldier in World War I, only to break with her upon his return from the war. Steegmuller writes that “Madeleine, bruised and bewildered by the change of Apollinaire’s tone and then by his silence, went on into a life of spinsterhood and teaching, learning by chance of his marriage and soon after of his death [in 1918]. She herself died in 1970” (page 256). Steegmuller speculates that “perhaps she had merely filled an important wartime need for a lonely soldier” (p. 256).

The marriage mentioned above was one Apollinaire made in the year of his death with Jacqueline Kolb, “a pretty, young-haired woman” who inspired Apollinaire’s poem “La Jolie Rousse” (“The Pretty Redhead”) (Steegmuller, page 268). It was a happy but of course all too brief union, ended when Apollinaire died of influenza and Jacqueline’s heart in turn was broken. Steegmuller writes that she “never remarried. Until her death in 1967 she continued to live” in the apartment she had shared with Apollinaire at 202 Boulevard Saint-Germain, surrounded by the paintings, sculptures and books Apollinaire had acquired in his brief life.

A melancholy tale indeed. And perhaps only through art or the spiritual life can one hope to overcome such melancholy and continue to live meaningfully in a way that brings good both to oneself and to others.

Sometimes people need to be galvanized out of their misery: The voice of the prophet or the artist is not always soft. Stevie Smith points this out in her poem “Anger’s Freeing Power” (Smith, 1985):

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I had a dream three walls stood up wherein a raven bird
Against the walls did beat himself and was this not absurd?

For sun and rain beat in that cell that had its fourth wall free
And daily blew the summer shower and the rain came presently

And all the pretty summer time and all the winter too
That foolish bird did beat himself till he was black and blue

Rouse up, rouse up, my raven bird, fly by the open wall
You make a prison of a place that is not one at all.

I took my raven by the hand, Oh come, I said, my Raven,
And I will take you by the hand and you shall fly to heaven.

But oh he sobbed and oh he sighed and in a fit he lay
Until two fellow ravens came and stood outside to say:

You wretched bird, conceited lump
You well deserve to pine and thump.

See now a wonder, mark it well
My bird rears up in angry spell,

Oh do I then? he says, and careless flies
O'er flattened wall at once to heaven's skies.

And in my dream I watched him go
And I was glad, I loved him so,

Yet when I woke my eyes were wet
To think Love had not freed my pet

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Anger it was that won him hence
As only Anger taught him sense.

Often my tears fall in a shower
Because of Anger's freeing power.

Smith's style is very interesting: She eschews almost all punctuation, retaining only what is needed to help scan the poem. It is a dramatic, a theatrical poem, as one can see by reading the poem aloud, reading certain lines fast (and Smith does not mind speeding up a line like Shakespeare did, by using the archaic "o'er" to condense two syllables into one), pausing dramatically, changing from one voice to another. The first six couplets are written in iambic heptameter; abruptly, this changes to iambic tetrameter, as the mood suddenly changes and the pace quickens, and the poem ends in this meter.

The raven is his own victim: Wrapped in melancholy, he does not see that one wall of his cell is missing and thus provides a way of escape. He persists, in his negative, self-centered way, to "beat himself till he was black and blue." He does not listen to the soft entreaties of the speaker of the poem; it takes the sarcastic jeers of his own kind to rouse him out of his misery and take action. It saddens the speaker of the poem to realize that human beings are so obdurate and unreasonable that sometimes it takes a sharp attack, rather than a loving appeal, to jar them out of their self-imposed prison, snap them out of their self-hypnosis to start the journey toward freedom.

Anger is such a powerful force in this poem that it is personified, it is a teacher, one, as the capital A signifies, commanding respect and even fear. Anger, therefore, can be a force for good; yet it is a dangerous one and difficult to control. It can free, but it can also destroy, if one lets it get out of hand or fails to check it when necessary.

Thus the need for art or for spirituality: Humans need to control forces which threaten to overwhelm them if they are not able to master themselves. Writing a poem can be a constructive way of both dispelling melancholy and releasing pent-up anger. A recent poem, "Extended Care" (Michael Ryan, 2003) is a brilliant example of a poet thus venting his spleen:

I'm not ready to write my last poems—
paean to the glory of sunporch and duck pond
and inner peace that comes to me at last
when, out of terror, I begin to pray incessantly
and love all my neighbors as I love myself,
including the unknown one who steals my crackers
and the former state senator who sings

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“God Bless America” for every meal and snack time.
I’ll have to be ninety plus, maybe over a hundred,
nine-tenths blind and needing a fresh diaper,
before my blinding fear of losing and not-getting
lifts like the huge purple curtain at the Metropolitan Opera
to reveal the extraordinary blessings of an ordinary day.
Maybe my hearing will also be so far gone
that I finally understand the voices in my head
debating whether or not I deserve to live,
when in fact—I’ll realize—I’m living O.K. right now,
although I may still believe life could be better
if someone installed a lock on my snack box
and gave that state senator a laryngectomy.
How lovely (I’ll think) every person I’ve known.
Even the egocentric shitheels had a kind of charm,
and the ones who lied purposely to cause me damage—
maybe they had kids they loved or parents they took care of.
They surely did nothing worse than the worst things I did.
Everyone will appear to me as a scarred soul
struggling with the same sort of torments and disappointments,
as death rises like a dinosaur out of the duck pond
and lumbers dripping toward me on the sunporch
while I glow with the modest good I did with my life,
grateful this gorgeous world will be here for others when I am gone.

This poem is very funny, scathing in its humor. The speaker of the poem confesses that he is not yet at the stage of serenity and acceptance that old age is supposed to bring to one (he may still be young), not able yet to follow the so-called “Golden Rule” of the New Testament (to love others as we love ourselves), not yet free of desire and the fear of loss and of death. In fact, he suggests he’ll have to be senile for all that to happen. Only if he is not in his right mind will he be able to accept what he clearly feels is unacceptable. He has feelings of worthlessness (“debating whether or not I deserve to live”), and realizes that he could be doing more, perhaps much more to make the world a better place than he does (“the modest good I did with my life”). He tries to find the good in even people who have done him wrong, yet is still angry enough at them to call them “egocentric shitheels.” He

himself, of course, is—as we all are—egocentric, allowing that the fact that the world will continue for others after he is dead is no comfort. He is, in short, like most human beings: Wanting to live a good life, to be happy, yet constantly beset by anger, self-doubt, resentment and selfish desires.

The title of the poem, “Extended Care,” is interesting. Social services which extend to patients at home (such as the blind, senile, incontinent old codger the speaker of the poem imagines he might turn into in the future) are one kind of extended care; but in this poem an extended meaning of the title is to have care for others outside of oneself—something that the speaker declares he is far from achieving.

But the fact that he is able to admit it is in itself positive. He is able to ridicule himself as well as others and realize that there is major room for improvement. And he does so in a witty, rhythmical way that is fun to read aloud. This poem would be a plum piece for an actor to get his teeth into, releasing all the invective and getting it out of his system and ours.

William Carlos Williams’ “The Sparrow” (Williams, 1969) is another poem which examines an imperfect life: the life of a sparrow as emblematic of a human life. The sparrow is lice-ridden; proud of his sexual prowess (even though, as the speaker of the poem says, such prowess “leads as often as not/ to our undoing”); surviving because of his “general truculence.” Even though he is proud of his sexual affairs, there is “Nothing even remotely/ subtle/ about his lovemaking”—he is, in other words, crude and noisy in his overtures to the opposite sex. Despite his pride, he has been subjugated by a female sparrow who held him “silent,/ subdued,/ hanging above the city streets/ until/ she was through with him.” All in all, there does not seem much to recommend this dubious little fellow; and when he dies, he is smashed flat on a sidewalk, abandoned and ignominious.

Yet what seems to be a melancholy end is not. The sparrow is still worth celebrating because, in spite of his faults, he strove with life until the end, not letting it defeat him. The speaker of the poem concludes,

...it is the poem
of his existence
that triumphed
finally;
a wisp of feathers
flattened to the pavement,
wings spread symmetrically
as if in flight,
the head gone,

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the black escutcheon of the breast
undecipherable,
an effigy of a sparrow,
a dried wafer only,
left to say
and it says it without offense,
beautifully;
This was I,
a sparrow.
I did my best;
farewell.

It is no small claim to make at the end of one's life: "I did my best." All humans are different, with different capabilities, some gifted with great talents and some with small; but, in the final analysis, what matters is not what we could have done if we had been blessed with greater or different abilities, or if we had been born as another person; what matters is how we use what we have, and how well. Even the fall of the humble sparrow, we are told by Jesus, is taken into account by God.

This is what poetry, even the most melancholy kind, teaches us. It teaches us to laugh about our misfortunes; to "take a sad song and make it better." We may not ever be entirely purged of melancholy, but at least we will be able to sing, as Amiens does in *As You Like It*,

Heigh-ho, sing heigh-ho, unto the green holly.
Most friendship is faining, most loving mere folly:
Then, heigh-ho, the holly.
This life is most jolly.

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