

The Intriguing Act of Facing Death

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1. Abstract

Victorian Poetry thematically impresses on our minds its preoccupation with the obsessive and challenging reality of death. As it is, two Victorian Poems single out themselves as insistently dwelling on this thematic concern: Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" and Browning's "Prospice". In "Crossing the Bar", Tennyson, who seems to have a reconciliatory attitude towards death, sees it as a reassuring, natural and peaceful event. The poem is far from being sad. It vividly describes the poet meditating over his own death. In "Prospice", Browning talks with his head held high as he intends to be reunited with his "soulmate", his dead wife. Clearly, his attitude towards death is that of anticipation and of, almost, defiance.

It is important to see, after all, that the alarming theme of the two poems is channeled to address a disengaging reality that concerns us all.

Key words or phrases:

Death; Victorian Poetry; inevitable reality; soulmate; anticipation; reassuring; alluring; submissive, placid.

2. Foreword

The vitality of the Victorian period is often isolated for our inspection. Safier speaks of "the intellectual seriousness and vitality of the age" (p. 600). The period also shows itself to be a period of uncertainty. The opening passage of Dickens's **A Tale of Two Cities** serves to sum up the controversial nature of the age. (Dickens, p.1). In **Victorian England: Portrait of an Age**, Young emphasises the Victorian code of respectability. (Young, p.2). It is also an age of technological and scientific inventions.

However, Halam, a poet and a close friend of Tennyson, criticises the age as being lawless: "The laws are almost suspended." (Halam. P.387).

There is a sense that Victorian poets can draw on the past for their thematic concerns and that change is inevitable. "... the Victorian poets... looked to the past for their themes... they felt that... every epoch was but a transition to the next (Bakley and Woods, p. vi).

It is also at this evocative period that the popularity of poetry is an issue under discussion. The Victorians often show that they are uncertain about the role and function of poetry.

3. Analysing and Evaluating Poetry

An interesting fact is that when evaluating poetry people often resort to their experiences in life. DiYanni, attests to this reality. "... in evaluating any poem, we appraise it according to our own special combination of cultural, moral and aesthetic values..." (p.9). In an illuminating sense, it is also suggested that poems "exist to bring us a sense and a perception of life, to widen and sharpen our contacts with existence." (Arp R and Greg Johnson (p.4).

However, far from generalising in appraising poetry, there are of course various methods of analysing it. Thus, we have a deconstructive reading of poetry. We also have the Formalistic Perspective that attends to metaphors, symbols and ironic cuts in the poetic text. From a historical view, the emphasis would be on the historical angle of poetry. Other methods also obtain, methods such Psychoanalytic, Sociological, Marxist, Feminist, Reader-Response and some others.

Now, to single out only two analytic methods for our own inspection, we could, thus, embark on a deconstructive reading of the two poems by disclosing the hierarchically ordered metaphysical terms: (soul / body; being / nonbeing; transitory / constant; movement / tranquility etc). Now, we have to exclude from the field of discourse those terms or meanings which do not accord with the privileged terms. "Body" is excluded for being non-essential and "transitory" for being defective and temporary. Then one has to proceed to show how the rule of indeterminacy prevails and how the newly asserted hierarchy of terms is itself displaced, failing to allow the new truth that is arrived at to emerge. This only means that language, and, in our case, poetic language is, as a deconstructionist sees it "irretrievably self-contradictory and self-destroying" and that "it cannot be controlled by writers." (DiYanni, p.355).

However, some people think that such analysis leaves us with nothing to clutch at. I do not think so. I myself have conducted a deconstructive analysis of three short poems by Emily Dickinson, an analysis that has received favourable reaction from readers. A deconstructive reading of poetry allows us to unravel the ambivalent poetic text and to unearth those elements which are vague, contradictory or suppressed. Yet this is only one way of analysing poetic texts.

It is Selden (p. 28), who, speaking of "close reading", suggests that it "affirms a belief in the specificity and verbal density of poetry." He explains that "one of the theoretical justification for this view is summed up by the title of one of Brook's essay 'The Hersey of Paraphrase.' " Selden then emphasises that for the new critics, poetic language cannot be translated or reduced to prose statements... "To do so would remove all the poetic texture."

Quite usefully, I have, this time, preferred to embark on a “close reading” or a “practical criticism” method to analyse the two poems, a method that seems to be interested in imagery and in the deployment of irony in the poetic text. From this angle, my analysis of the two poems, namely that of Tennyson and that of Browning, tries to explore and capture the tension resulting from the conflicting realities. The reader would see that I have tried to convey the poets’ human and humane response to a reality (ie death) which haunts us all.

4. Thematic Concerns

a. Alfred Tennyson as a poet

Eliot looks at Tennyson as a craftsman: “The writing of poetry to him was a vocation in which he toiled... ” (Eliot, p.175). Niclson sees Tennyson as the expert craftsman: “The writing of poetry was to him a vocation in which he toiled as laboriously as any worker in metals or precious gems.” (Niclson, p.20). In his poems, he discusses the importance of struggling on with life. To him, death, thus, offers a chance to finally rest and forget.

b. Tennyson’s Poem

Crossing the Bar

Sunset and evening star,
 And one clear call for me!
 And may there be no moaning of the bar,
 When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
 Too full for sound and foam,
 When that which drew from out the boundless deep
 Turns again home. 5

Twilights and evening bell,
 And after that the dark! 10
 And may there be no sadness of farewell,
 When I embark.

For tho’ from out our bourne of time and place
 The flood may bear me far,
 I hope to see my Pilot Face to face 15
 When I have crossed the bar.

c. Analysis

consisting of four quatrain stanzas, this poem, "Crossing the Bar" * could be described as placid (= calm and peaceful) and the poet's attitude as complacent. In what adroitly substantiates a metaphor for going into the next world or another kind of life, the poetic voice projects the experience of a sailor embarking at evening time without feeling sad. In a reassuring sense, the speaker, or more exactly, the poetic voice uses the metaphor of sea voyage to describe the journey from life to death. It is Jacques Derrida, who heightens the effect of time on use: "... what we cannot deny is that experience is conditioned by time." (Derrida, p.6). Thinking that he is being called, the speaker who is the poet hopes that he will not hear the mournful sound of the waves as they beat against the sandbar when he sets out to sea: "And may there be no moaning of the bar / When I put to sea" (Lines 3-4). Culler suggests (p.59) that "Jakobson's basic technique in analysing poems is to divide them into stanzas and show how symmetrical distribution of grammatical items organise the stanzas into various groupings.

Accordingly, as the speaker wants in stanza 1 to depart peacefully, we see him in the second stanza enhancing a wish for a full tide that has neither "sound" nor "foam" (Line 6), a quietened tide that allows what has been carried from the limitless depths of the ocean "...the boundless deep" (Line 7) to come back to its original source ie the depths: ("Turn again home" Line 8).

It is the third quatrain stanza that, making a shift, announces the end of the day and also the sound of the evening bell which is immediately followed by darkness: "Twilight and evening bell / And after that the dark!" (Lines 9-10). It is exactly at this particular moment that the speaker hopes that no one will cry for him when he departs ie when he dies: "And may there be no sadness of farewell, / When I embark (Lines 11-12).

In the final stanza, the speaker earnestly argues that although he could be carried beyond the human limits of time and space ("out our bourne of Time and Place" Line (3), he hopes to face his Pilot (ie Christ) when he has "Crossed the Bar" (Line 16).

a. Robert Browning as a poet

Browning is modern in the sense that his language and imagery are those of our time. Symons catalogues his merits as a poet:

In richness of nature, in scope and penetration of mind and vision, in energy of passion and emotion, he is probably second among English poets to Shakespeare alone (Symons, p.1)

It is left for Jones to project Browning's vitality:

* "Crossing the Bar" is a metaphor for death. Tennyson wrote "Crossing the Bar" three years before he died in 1889. He requested that this poem should appear as the final poem in all collections of his work. That the import of this poem is religious could explain why it is important for the poet.

A plenitude of powers, all active, are revealed by him: they cooperate, sever, mingle, collide, combine, and are all astrain – but they are all physical.

Dowden suggests that it is quite clear that Browning can hardly evade the vitalising effect of action: "He [= Browning] plays upon the will, summons it from lethargy to activity" (Dowden, p.396).

Chesterton likes to speak of Browning's "ingenuities": "He had a capacity for becoming perfectly childish in his ingenuities." (Chesterton, p.85).

b. Browning's Poem

Prospice

Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,
 The mist in my face,
 When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
 I am nearing the place,
 The power of the night, the press of the storm,
 The post of the foe; 6
 Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
 Yet the strong man must go:
 For the journey is done and the summit attained,
 And the barriers fall, 10
 Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
 The reward of it all.
 I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
 The best and the last!
 I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and forbore, 15
 And bade me creep past.
 No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
 The heroes of old,
 Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
 Of pain, darkness and cold. 20
 For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
 The black minute's at end,
 And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
 Shall dwindle, shall blend,
 Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain, 25
 Then a light, then thy breast,
 O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
 And with God be the rest!

c. Analysis

The suggestive meaning of the title of Browning's poem "ie look forward" implies the poet's positive attitude towards death. Clearly, the speaker in the poem must be the poet himself who insists on bravely facing his inevitable end. Clearly the theme of the poem demands to be a reflective one.

At the opening lines of the poem, the poetic voice is earnest to enumerate the challenges the poet is more than ready to go through: "the fog" (Line 1), "the mist" (Line 2), "The snows", "the blasts" (Line 3), "the power of the night" [= Darkness] and "the press of the storm" (Line 5). These entities occur after the rhetorical question "Fear death?" which is positively answered by the title of the poem.

The poem enunciates that the poet is resolved to defy the deterrents and to ultimately arrive at peace: "For the journey is done and the summit attained / And the barriers fall (Lines 9-10). This is quite suggestive in the sense that an evocative reality in the poem is being projected through figurative language to enunciate Browning's brave stand against the inevitable finality. It is Culler, who announces that "what seems off is, in fact, acceptable since it is figurative and therefore capable of being understood." (Culler, p181.).

Earlier, at a certain point, the poetic voice acknowledges the horrifying reality of death (Line 7). However, death is not being envisaged as a passive reality but as a climax where one's heroic power of resistance is tested.

Towards the end of the poem, the brave stand of the poetic voice against death seems to be eventually rewarded. There is the feeling that "the black minutes [are] at end" (line 22) and that there will be "peace out of pain" (Lines 25) and "light" (Line 26).

Browning's poem ends by the speaker being united with his "soulmate", the person he loves so dearly ie his dead wife. There is a vivifying anticipation that he would embrace her after death: "O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again" (Line 27).

5. Conclusion

To recapture things, one could easily feel that although the two poems speak of death, yet they communicate different points of view. We have seen that Browning's attitude towards death in "Prospice" is different from that expressed by Tennyson in his "Crossing the Bar" in the sense that the former's attitude towards death is amenably alluring, whereas that of Tennyson is almost submissive. Browning also seems to enunciate different images that reveal him a warrior besieging his foe, a triumphant fighter, whereas Tennyson, in a quiet surrendering sense, sees death as a mere transition into another kind of life and, thus, in embracing the fact of death, looks at it as a homecoming, something that one has to accept as the end of one's journey.

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الفعل المبهر لمواجهة الموت

المستخلص

يطبع الشعر الفكتوري على أذهاننا، من ناحية الموضوع، إشغاله بحقيقة الموت المستحوذة والمتحدية. وكما هو الحال، تفرد قصيدتان فكتوريتان نفسيهما وتسهبان باصرار على هذا الاهتمام بالموضوع: قصيدة تنسن "عبور المرفأ" وقصيدة براوننغ "تطلع إلى أمام".

في "عبور المرفأ"، يرى تنسن، الذي يبدو أن نظرتة "تصالحية" نحو الموت، الموت بوصفه حدثاً مُطمئناً وطبيعيًا ووادعًا. والقصيدة أبعد ما تكون عن كونها حزينة. وهي تصف، بوضوح، الشاعر وهو يتأمل موته.

[أما] في "التطلع إلى أمام"، فيتحدث براوننغ ورأسه ينتصب عاليًا وهو ينوي أن يتحد مع "رفيقة روحه"، زوجته الميتة. وواضح أن نظرتة نحو الموت هي نظرة توقع وتقرّب من أن تكون نظرة تحدي.

كلمات مفتاحية: الشعر الفكتوري، الموت، عبور، براوننغ، توقع، تحدي، تنسن