

Poets on Poems I

I watched the eclipse from a hilltop in Wales. It was an experience of revelation, not of occlusion or loss. Just in time, and in the right place, the wind tore a hole in the clouds and showed a black sun or a black moon and over the rim of the disc a thin crescent of more brilliance than you could bear to look at. This revelation, itself too bright to do more than shyly glance at or squint at like a child through your fingers, was also the permitted glimpse, and so the revelation, of a fire and a light which, if it came, would burn your eyesight out.

Many of Graves's poems have to do with terror; or, you might just as well say, with revelation or visitation. Terror comes into them, the poem opens up a sight of it, the eyes of the poem widen with terror.

Surviving the War, it terrorized him for the rest of his life. I have been told that in his last years, no longer speaking, he would sit staring at things he could see and nobody else could see, in a vacant terror. Having been sorted away among the dead, and then fetched back among the living, it left him all his life peculiarly open to visitations of the purest terror.

'There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear'. But love in Graves comes like the curved blade of an eclipse. One glimpse and you foreknow the unbearable power of the rest.

Just to be contrary, I want to write about three poems in which the coming of love, or a visitation in the shape and feeling of love, is not quite as I have just described it. Indeed, she enters quietly: pure gift and blessing. My excuse is that when I looked them out by re-reading the whole of the edition I have had since 1961 they seemed to me exceptional in a poetic world of trouble, bad haunting and terror.

The first is 'Like Snow':

She, then, like snow in a quiet night,
 Fell secretly. And the world waked
 With dazzling of the drowsy eye,
 So that some muttered 'Too much light,'
 And drew the curtains close.
 Like snow, warmer than fingers feared,
 And to soil friendly;
 Holding the histories of the night
 In yet unmelted tracks.

As the title indicates, the poem is about her, not snow; or only about snow in order to say what she is like. But the application of the simile to her is not straightforward. Things said about snow puzzle us or at least intrigue us when we apply them to her. For example, that it is 'warmer than fingers feared,/ And to soil friendly'. And in 1.2 'fell' suits snow in a straightforward way but is odd of a woman, unless with some sense of transgression; 'secretly', on the other hand, suits woman (perhaps in that sense) better than snow. So the simile plays over the woman but cannot fully clarify her. Nor should we expect that it, or any other device of art, would be able to. And yet the poem is about a revelation. Its strongest rhymes are night/light/night. Something is given that dazzles 'the drowsy eye'. The reaction of some to this offered revelation is to draw the curtains. But the poem's last four lines show a dawning of enlightenment in one mind coming out of sleep: three little insights into snow; and of them the last, the tracks still there to be read, is the most important.

But the poem is about her, not snow. The opening of the heart (through the sensuousness of 'warmer than fingers feared') and of the spirit, showing itself in the better apprehension of snow, is an oblique essay at the irreducible nature of her. The poem, which she occasions, praises her in its very shortcoming. It is only what she is *like*.

The next poem is 'The Door':

When she came suddenly in
It seemed the door could never close again,
Nor even did she close it - she, she -
The door lay open to a visiting sea
Which no door could restrain.

Yet when at last she smiled, tilting her head
To take her leave of me,
Where she had smiled, instead
There was a dark door closing endlessly,
The waves receded.

The poem is two stanzas, two sentences, in the first her coming, in the second her leaving, the door opens, the door closes, the sea advances, the sea withdraws. Each stanza is intact in itself, with its own rhymes, but connected by taking over one of them - 'she/sea' - into 'me/endlessly'. A woman pushes open the door and comes in. The wonder in what might be (for other people) nothing very exciting is expressed in the tremendous image of the unrestrainable entering sea. 'She, she' sounds like 'Thalatta! Thalatta! The sea! The sea!' At the same time there is something poignantly particular in the gauche 'Nor even did she close it...', as though he expected she would, for a normal privacy. Instead, in comes the visiting sea and the door cannot be closed.

Then she leaves. Throughout the first line of the second stanza we do not know that she is leaving. She smiles, at last. Has she not smiled till then? It is particularly cruel if smiling is her signal that she is leaving. And 'tilting her head' is enigmatic too. Tilting to one side, the sense might be quizzical or seductive. Or does she bow her head, in a gesture of acknowledgement and goodbye, or raise it in the way the Greeks do when they are saying no? The smile is the last thing and after it the door closes and the sea recedes.

Each stanza is complete in itself because the event in each, her coming, her departure, seems final. Each is wholly convincing. There will always be that plenitude, there will never be anything else but

withdrawal and loss. I've often thought that the ability to write poetry comes from an inability to take the sensible view that the state you are in will not last for ever. Perhaps here her withdrawal is more final than her coming, if 'was' is more final than 'seemed': 'It seemed the door could never close again ... There was a dark door closing endlessly...' That construction is especially distressing, as though loss itself were continuous, rather than an achieved condition. A constant losing.

The third poem is 'The Visitation':

Drowsing in my chair of disbelief
I watch the door as it slowly
A trick of the night wind?

Your slender body seems a shaft of moonlight
Against the door as it gently closes.
Do you cast no shadow?

Your whisper is too soft for credence,
Your tread like blossom drifting from a bough,
Your touch even softer.

You wear that sorrowful and tender mask
Which on high mountain tops in heather-flow
Entrances lonely shepherds;

And though a single word scatters all doubts
I quake for wonder at your choice of me:
Why, why and why?

This time when the door closes ('slowly opens ... gently closes') it contains her in the room, for a while at least, for the time of the poem. Inspiration is a rush of faith, which until you see the product of it, the verses themselves, may be indistinguishable from a rush of credulity. This poem, beginning in disbelief, moves through incredulous questions to a state beyond doubt; and the last question is not whether he

can be sure but why he should be so blessed as to be, for once, absolutely sure. Inspiration comes as faith, in the shape and the feeling of love. Again the locus is his room and, as in 'Like snow' (and probably 'The Door' too), the time is night; but the imagery is of outdoors also, in daylight as the spring blossom drifts from the bough, and at night under the moon on heathery mountain tops: which is an opening up almost as large as the sea. Inspiration is the recovery of ability; but ability has its wellspring in love and faith: in the belief that, despite all the propaganda and practice to the contrary, love exists and matters vitally. The imagery and, in fourth stanza especially, the diction and the rhythms too, are romantic - old-fashionedly or, you might say, polemically so. Their incongruity in the world we live in now is obvious and polemical. For what they express to be true, 'It is requir'd / You do awake your faith,' as Paulina says to Leontes. If you can, and anybody visited like this ought to be able to, then the old or perhaps an adolescent wonder is recovered and life looks very different; the way it ought to look.

In the second poem there was a *frisson* of terror in the continuousness of loss with which the poem ends. There may be a touch of it here too: like the dead walking, she casts no shadow; she wears a mask, tender but also sorrowful; and certainty - the image and reality of which is her entering the room - is the certainty of being hooked through the heart by something' as definite as the sickle of sun I saw above a black moon from my hill in Wales.

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