

Poets on Poems II

She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep

She tells her love while half asleep,
 In the dark hours,
 With half-words whispered low:
 As Earth stirs in her winter sleep
 And puts out grass and flowers
 Despite the snow,
 Despite the falling snow.

Robert Graves

Like many of Graves's short love-poems, the first impression of this is artlessness and universality: it is the love of everywoman, mumbling her love as she is falling asleep. But, as with all great lyric love-poems since the troubadours, its effects are far from artlessly achieved. The first device that emerges on closer inspection is the delicate rhyme, almost masked by the irregular line lengths and metrical pattern. The simple ABCABC rhyme is rounded off conclusively with a repeated C-rhyme; the poem has absolute closure. Less obviously, the poem employs repetition in a curious and haunting way. The repetition with variation of the last two lines is immediately noticeable; but there are other repetitions of a kind that might seem accidental - or even ambiguous and therefore damaging - in a poem. (The first thing that the drafter of a poem has to check back for is unintended repetition.) Here we have the apparently ambiguous 'her': mainly it is the everywoman in the poem, but Earth in the fourth line stirs in 'her' winter sleep: Earth's, that is, but the meaning slot of 'her' is already taken so it overlaps. As well as woman, then, it is Ge, the Earth as goddess. Again, 'half asleep' is no more than descriptive until we come to 'half-words', indicating that the poem's vagueness is not an accident. And finally the snow's 'falling', the adjective added in the last line, supplies the missing notion, the word that the poem is sleepily reaching out for: she is 'falling' asleep.

There is one line which seems out of keeping: the short second line, 'in the dark hours.' Perhaps this line pulls the poem towards the genre of consolation; out of context 'the dark hours' expresses quite a potent sense of night anxiety, even depression. But the murmuring of love is healing - and restorative, in the same way that the silent work of the Earth during the night is restorative in Nature (another medieval or troubadour echo). One other piece of language seems out of keeping: the verb 'puts out' is awkward, both as a construction and as an idea. The Earth doesn't literally put grass and flowers out during one night of snow; it takes longer than that. The slight idiomatic awkwardness is in keeping with the poem's sleepy striving for expression: it is another kind of 'half-word.' The long time perspective, even though it is telescoped to a single night, is because the process of producing grass and flowers is a slow but sure one; it is the same with love.

In the end though, the poem is a perfect balance of these universal facts with the particular that any person can feel attuned to. The nameless 'She' is nameless both because she is Everywoman and because she is any woman; the reader is to supply from their own experience the individual mumbling voice that can't find the verb that describes the coming down of snow and going to sleep: the wonderful descant word 'falling.' For universal poems to work they have to be indefinite. The essence of this extraordinarily beautiful poem is vagueness: 'half-words' and idioms that are not quite right. So the poem's decisive last line is the poet appearing, to pull the blanket over all that has gone before. Everything is asleep: woman, Earth and poem.

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