

One scholar who has made a serious and, I feel, admirable study of your work, Professor Morse Peckham, says that contemporary readers are hampered in their appreciation of your poems because they do not know how to give them the close, slow reading they require. Sometimes your sentences are very long and complex and they do not yield their full meaning when read at an impatient prose pace. When I first began to write a great deal of verse, my poems were short, with short lines and sentences. As I entered more deeply into the flow of song, everything grew longer in tandem with my ability to concentrate and simultaneously refrain from thinking in prose. And yet, when I look back to the one poem I recall from my earliest days, a piece written as an in-class creative writing assignment when I was 15 years old and in the 9th grade, much of what I am doing prosodically now was already present then. I was aware of your work at that time but only just; I had not yet begun to penetrate it, so I cannot say if your influence was involved. We were told to write a poem with the first line starting with 'A' and each successive line beginning with the next sequential letter of the alphabet. Mine read,

A man who was quite fond of Pliny the Elder
Bought a collection of books by the same —
Crusted with bat guano from someone's attic,
Decaying with age to the utmost extreme....

There they are, my beloved amphibrachs, the short-long-short meter I favor; there the long, long sentences; and — what the reader of this tiny sample cannot know is that, in the story this poem tells, a man who is a dedicated enthusiast of a Roman author I then mistook for a philosopher (Pliny was a natural historian) buys a set of books which bear his name on the covers but actually contain the work of the Marquis de Sade. He tells his neighbors about the brilliant and high-minded moral philosophy supposedly therein, they take one look at what is actually printed there, and they have the man committed.

All I know for certain is that I read your lyrics "A Forsaken Garden" and "The Garden of Prosperine." I had read no biographical material. There was only one biography of you in our public library, and it was an early and tame one; I read it a year or two later when my Pre-Raphaelitism was at its peak. I was precocious enough to know about the terrible Marquis, although I had never so much as glimpsed his works (not for lack of trying) and did not know that he regarded himself as a philosopher; I assumed he was just a memorable pornographer. I may have known that you were a rumored masochist, but I could not have known of your admiration for Sade's writings. As always, my verses ran ahead of my knowing on any other level. Only bits and pieces were present to my foremind, but the verses saw it all. You were even — repeatedly — taken into protective custody by friends and family members when you were on the verge of dying of excess. How very strange all of this is. The longer I live with it, the stranger it becomes.

And the longer I work, the more I become myself in my songs, the closer I come to you. My verses have grown into confident, leisurely length, the element of time being one of their basic, conscious components. I do not agree with Professor Peckham that complex verse sentences must be read slowly and pieced apart like ordinary prose rhetoric, although I recommend that readers who are new to my style take that approach until they catch on; you taught me something that goes much, much deeper: that the nature of song is swiftness itself; that any sense of duration of time is the most mutable of things; and that the prose mind is not the song mind and must not predominate either in the making or the hearing of song. You taught me another lesson which I have always borne in mind, but which I am learning again on a new level even at this moment: You taught me that, in shifting back and forth between the poles, there is a sort of balance to be found in lightness and humor. No happy man lives the way you did during your middle years, and yet you were often able to laugh; the flagellation poems, as disturbing as they can be, are really very funny. Even readers who know you only by "The Garden of Prosperine" will appreciate your parody of your own style, "Nephelidia":

From the depth of the dreamy decline of the dawn through
a notable nimbus of moonshine,
Pallid and pink as the palm of the flag-flower that flickers
with fear of the flies as they float....

And when Alfred Lord Tennyson was pontificating in public with "The Higher Pantheism," you provided a dastardly accurate restatement of his ideas with "The Higher Pantheism in a Nutshell," which ends,

Parallels all things are: yet many of these are askew:
You are certainly I: but certainly I am not you.
Springs the rock from the plain, shoots the stream from the rock:
Cocks exist for the hen, but the hen exists for the cock.
God, whom we see not, is: and God, who is not, we see:
Fiddle, we know, is diddle: and diddle, we take kit, is dee.

Still, it is surely not meant to be a balancing act forever; this mode of humor is an adaptation to disagreeable circumstances more often than not, one that we might in the main forgo if we could cease to feel the pain that makes it necessary. Playfulness is welcome everywhere, but mockery of oneself — even as that serves to lighten, it also serves to remind. You make me smile, but I love you best when you sweep me away altogether. There, in the ecstasy of song, is found the death which is not death; which is life itself, sprung from song's own source. And you know so well how to take me there — even after many years and many songs of my own, to do so lies well within your powers.

From your "Hymn to Proserpine":

O daughter of earth, of my mother, her crown and blossom of birth,
I am also, I also, thy brother; I go as I came unto earth.
In the night where thine eyes are as moons are in heaven, the night where thou art,
Where the silence is more than all tunes, where sleep overflows from the heart,
Where the poppies are sweet as the rose in our world, and the red rose is white,
And the wind falls faint as it blows with the fume of the flowers of the night,
And the murmur of spirits that sleep in the shadow of Gods from afar
Grow dim in thine ears and deep as the deep dim soul of a star,
In the sweet low light of thy face, under heavens untrod by the sun,
Let my soul with their souls find place, and forget what is done and undone.
Thou art more than the Gods who number the days of our temporal breath;
For these give labour and slumber, but thou, Proserpina, death.
Therefore now at thy feet I abide for a season in silence....

The following verses were written between the 3rd and 4th parts of this essay. I posted them on my Web page, AEAEA: Recurring Dream Island (www.pacifier.com/~starling), with this note:

"Exaltée is perhaps the word you were searching for. You know, when the atmosphere is rife with the incensuous odor of unwashed princesses. Quick, somebody, throw a brick through the window. I do seem a bit under the weather."



A FEVERISH SORT OF AMUSEMENT

Always roaming around, never one with the lesson intact; always searching for what has
been found
nearly whole, with your own thought in fragments — a guest that flies wide of the mark
but a cordial sound
welcome everywhere magic attends solemn music with humorous gestures and
merriment, aye —
this is a glimpse of the ghost of the future. It knows where to find me and, furthermore,
why
I shall make myself easy to sway toward something not fully revealed — which I trust
with my life.
I walk through the valley, the gale roars, the thunder outshouts it, the sea is in sight — the
ghost-wife
goes abroad at the ominous hour of white moonrise in luminous veils, then the thorns of
the ditch
dart toward her pale weeds and disrupt their fine unity. Light on the frail naked flesh of
the witch
sees her stunned for an instant. She gathers her courage about her, then glides very
visibly on.
Nothing will trouble her now, save to learn that the force that obsessed her is suddenly
gone —
or converted to fingers like claws, or like thistles — or standing by laughing, a tune on his
lips
between outbursts that echoes the high wind that whistles above, through the leaves
where the lunar eclipse
that has brought them both into this night is now forming. His laughter confuses her.
Why does he shout
In such eerie abandon? She feels cold and warm at the same time and rewinds her torn
weeds about
her perhaps highly feverish body. A dizzy incitement — a tiny pain — prickles my eyes,
and they tear up. I don't recall quite what it is, but — it hurts me so nicely, I reel with
surprise.
He stands on the pathway, his head tilted, smiling; I feel very sad for the sight I present,
then I look a bit deeper and find a new style of enchantment, its purpose entirely blent
all throughout the long story we've lived. Though I've listed a bit to the breathless, and
he to the bad
in our off-kilter times, we have not really missed its true import, and so much is still to be
had
of the teaching and learning it offers — the ghost-voice that echoes around us in spell after
spell
comes in cheerful as well as devouring and dolorous phases, and I am its wedded wife.
Tell
its location, my haunted progenitor, husband and musical offspring and — all of you — say
where is the face of the Moon in this uncanny story, then ask it to come out and play.
It knows what it will find when the cloud passes over entirely, that shadow of Earth on its
bright
silver visage — and so do we both, my dear love. I just hope it will not only laugh at the
sight.

Judith Griffis lives in Astoria.

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