

A Time to Weep

By Julian Scutts

Foreword

Critics commonly apply the technique of making a statistical note of certain "key words" found throughout the works of some particular poets. Apparently "gold" is the most frequent substantive in the poetry of Robert Browning. (1) The combination of "Wanderer" and "Hut" occurs so insistently in the works of Goethe that this verbal phenomenon calls for the discovery of some deep-seated causal factors able to explain it.¹ (2) The notion of the transcendence of individual words in whatever context they occur has engaged the minds of rabbis,² (3) biblical exegetes and, in recent times, scholars in the fields of linguistics and textual criticism.³ (4) On a more pragmatic level, poets create word-patterns which emerge and are recognized as such only after their corpus of works has formed in sufficient measure to allow a comparative analysis of its constituents, the words within it.⁴ This fact provides evidence that such patterns are not the result of any deliberate or preconceived design. The following collection of poems is based on their apparently arbitrary inclusion of the verb "to weep" and its derivations.

Notes

1. Barbara Melchiori, *Browning's Poetry of Reticence* (London, 1968), p.40.
2. L.A. Willoughby, "The Image of the 'Wanderer' and the 'Hut' in Goethe's Poetry," (*Etudes Germaniques*, 3, Autumn 1951).
3. The second hermeneutic principle of rabbinical exegesis (Rabbi Yishmael's *baraisa*) is based on the premise that a word is imbued with a divinely bestowed meaning that transcends any particular context. Texts and passages in the Bible that contain the same word are compared on the basis of this premise.
4. Jurij Tynjanov, "The Meaning of the Word in Verse," in *Readings in Russian Poetics/Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. by Ladislav Mateijka and Krystina Pomorska (Michigan Slavic Publications, Ann Arbor, 1978), pp. 136-145.

Xerxes Wept

How ravaged is this land,

a virgin found by men of war.

Who sets upon our temple violent bands,

burns wisdom's record,

scars beauty left by sculptors' hands?

This land's conqueror is he,

and Xerxes is his name.

But Xerxes weeps, a dew-eyed maid.

Why should he weep,

the conqueror of this land?

He weeps for what he knows and sees.

His mighty host, his men-at-arms,

his hundred myriad blades and shields

he sees dissolve like flakes of snow

upon wet grass, fresh fallen.

A hundred years, their flesh is dust

and rust their gleaming glory.

A conqueror of conquerors is there,

and Chronos is his name.

His hands stronger than all human hands

That hold the blade and hurl the dart.

His hands none stays

save One alone,

that One who guides the sculptor's hand

inspires the pen, gives prophets words,

leads those who will in righteous ways,

the conqueror of the conqueror of conquerors,

Whose name is one, one only.

The Tears I Shed

Tell me, O willow, why dost thou weep

beside the lake? Why dost thou weep?

I will not tell thee why I do weep,

why I do weep beside the lake.

I will not tell thee why I weep so.

I know why thou weepst, O willow, I know,
for thy branches, thy leaves and thy trunk,
for they will come with axes and saws
when they come for to chop thee up.

No, not for myself I weep, I weep,
but for the tree alone on the hill,
for they shall come with axes and saws
and him shall they fell to the ground.

Then why dost thou weep, O foolish tree,
for the tree alone on the hill,
for while they hack and saw him down,
they shall spare not a thought for thee?

So then I must tell thee, foolish man,
why I weep beside the lake.
From wood they make boards,
from boards a box, a box to lay thee in.
So now I must tell thee, O foolish man,
The tears that I shed are for thee.

One Night to Angels' Weeping

Humdumpty was an analyst, a Cambridge Ph.D.,
A noted bio-atomist, whatever that might might be.
Indeed, from earliest childhood it was his single aim
To analyse no matter what might enter his domain.
He analysed his father's watch and next the neighbour's cat.
Ah! Little more was seen or heard of Felix after that.

Astounding learned padagogues, hard pressed to keep his pace,
Humdumpty grew up daily--in knowledge if not grace.

And then at university his intellectual power
Decimated Einstein and the works of Schopenhauer.
With ease that was amazing he romped a Double First,
And yet, for all his learning, nought quenched his burning thirst.

Despite the storm, and tumult that marked his inner life,
Humdumpty found the leisure to woo--and win--a wife.
He loved her--Oh! so dearly, his idol and his joy!
Alack! How oft our dearest 'tis we ourselves destroy.
One day in stormy weather he raised his eyes above,

And posed himself the riddle: "What constitutes her love?"

One night--to angels' weeping--the dark thought seized his mind:
"By scalpel and analysis the answer I shall find."
Full soon she took a sleeping draught, and when the time was due,
He set about his gruesome task, inspired by love so true.
How tenderly, how lovingly, he cut into her heart.
With what profound emotion he set his spouse apart.

To isolate that molecule in which all love resides
He scrutinized each corpuscle, and did much else besides.
All data was computerized, and ere a while had passed,
A reasonable hypothesis was imminent at last.
How tantalizing is the truth, how far--and yet, how near!
'Twas in the corner of his eye--and then would disappear.

It dawned at last upon him, his efforts would prove vain,
Unless he somehow managed to join her up again.
Of every art that served this end he tried the whole range through.
He first tried biophysics--and his last resort was glue.
Alas, alas, Humdumpty! There is a fateful law:
Some things men set asunder no mortal can restore.

They did not need a hangman or Madame Guillotine.
Before another week had passed, he died of bitter spleen.
Now some say he's in Heaven, and others, he's in Hell.
I'm not a theologian, it's difficult to tell.
For sure, he cut his dear wife up, and who would call that right?
But was it not his quest for truth that brought about his plight?

Cain's Complaint

One morning ere the sun burnt hot
My brother Abel pleased me not,
And though my face shone like the sun,
When moonlight came I cudgelled him.
Oh, had my brother marked me well
There were no more for me to tell.
One morning when the sun burnt hot
Again my brother pleased me not.
I cut a bough to make a bow,
And with a dart I laid him low.
When next time he pleased me not
I made a gun and with it shot.
Should he provoke me but once more,
I'll have yet deadlier things in store.
Bombs I'll make till I have one
That shall dispatch a megaton.
Then shall my brothers mark me well
And there'll be no more to tell.

One evening ere the sun had set
Through his device his end Cain met.
And Rachel wept and Sarah sighed
When Cain the unrepentant died.

"Though there was God in Heaven to trust,
he found for me and poisoned dust,"
wrote Death his epitaph,
"And so I'll have the final laugh."
But then at last the Archangel cries:
"Cain's had his day. Let Abel rise."

Thoughts of a Snowman

So happy there the boys and girls
around me playing in the pure white snow
under a vault so clear and blue.
The same sunlight than shines on them
and cheers them with its warm caress
makes me slowly melt away.

I weep, perspire,
grow smaller, softer, with each hour,
I made by happy hands
with the snow of yesterday.
Though today I melt away,
though tomorrow I am no more,
happy am I for their sakes,
for the children playing there.