

# NOTES ON AN ENGLISH POEM

“For there are several ways of conveying the same Truth to the Mind of Man, and to chuse the pleasantest of these ways, is that which chiefly distinguishes Poetry from Prose..”

John Dryden-An essay on the Georgics, 1697

Poetry reveals vision. It is a great release or outlet for internal struggles which occur as a result of what one detects and/or senses; later, translating those thoughts to recognizable forms through popular language. Lacking comprehension, none are able to perceive the tangled threads interwoven in a poem. So poetry, for that matter, is skillful word play. To be more exact, it is ‘poesis’—creative writing—exhibited. Whether on papyri, shards of pottery or slices of stone, thus, allowing a reader to gaze in, in effect, to see.

Buried truths lay hidden within good poetry and it is a reader's business to engage each phrase, sifting each word for its particular nuance, and interpreting the information every line divulges. In this sense, a poem may possess foresight, shadowing the future. It may display insight—discretionary wisdom, or it may shine light on the past—hindsight, imparting meaning to yesterday's events. Because poetry's range is connected to the poet's mental & scribal capacities, one should read with eyes both open and closed; reading what is locatable before the eye, but studying it with feeling.

In another time and place..

He never really knew his grandfather. He had heard a few stories here and there from the folks about him. But now he sits alone in an attic trying to gain some insight into the character of the man. Surrounded by old discarded relics and other paraphernalia, which has been left to him, and various items strewn all over the floor, he searches for clues, anything that will tell him of his grandfather's tastes and habits. There is a file lying atop a stack of old papers a few feet from him.

So he reaches for it, thrusting his hand inside only to remove some small slips of paper containing hardly legible scribbling. He knows that they are poems of some type. It had been rumored that grandfather, at one time, conducted private poetry readings at home. Now glaring upward at him was difficult to read English letters that resembled Greek cursive scripts, and a few cards in other idiolects from long ago. Although he knew it to be English, he wondered what treasures the mystery writings might contain.

And so, he began to read. Line after line spoke to him, and new ideas burst forth as if petals on a flower unfolding. And for the first time in his young life he was able to view a now deceased relative in an altogether different light. Each slip of paper became a cherished commodity to which he held tightly till his dying day. And at his death, the papers were lost again.

Many years later..

Walking along a side street in a foreign European city, a bibliophile enters a second hand book store and purchases some old pages, cluttered with dust, and sitting by themselves on a corner shelf.

Later, while perusing the contents he notices that each dusty page hides small poetic word clusters. (These are the notes found long ago in the attic, mentioned above). Deciphering them will certainly prove a challenge, but, happy to engage himself in the rudiments of paleography and primary evidence analysis, he thus, decides to publish them on line in an annotated form.---\*The poem itself has been reformatted in order to accent certain points, and all spelling has been standardized.

## Attic fragments Poem #1

WITH GLOSSORIAL, HISTORICAL AND EXPLANATORY NOTES

SO DIVINE!

Ho! Sun, moon, sky, stars,

One from among you **d**escended below.

Tears, pain, pangs, scars,

Upwards **a**scended, bone and blood, shed below.

Clouds, Winds, Earth, and Rain,

One far above you, enthroned now, again

But Lo! Son of David, shining star,

Whose realm **i**ncrease**t**h far below. So

Here, there, joy and laud

One reclamation, to Him, look and go!

DENOUEMENT

He journeyed afar to be near, so hear!

Upon examination of the slips of paper recovered, it is obvious that the author patiently tested each word's phonemic value.

## TEXTUAL NOTES & PUNCTUATION

Title is original to the poem. 'So.' adverbial in sense and comparable to 'very.' Divine is from L. *divinus*, inspired pertaining to deity. From *divus*, a deity.

- {Line 1} Ho,<sup>1</sup> then four monosyllabic words, each punctuated by a comma. A stain to the worded side of two of the cards obscures the Final {n} of 'moon'—the {ky} of 'sky'—and the {ars} of stars. Reconstructed text- '(Ho! Sun, moo{n}, s{ky}, st{ars}).' This proposal is based upon context and graphology.
- {Line 4} The author emended the word 'flesh' to 'bone' reading. As in line two, a period sign follows the word 'below,' which ends the scansion.
- {Line 5} Sentence was originally preceded by 'To wit<sup>2</sup>—that is to say.' A grammatical way of linking two sentences in apposition. Substituted mono-syllabic 'earth' for 'fire.' Here, I have supplied the punctuation of line one.
- {Line 6} Author, deleted the relative pronoun 'who—introducing a clause,' and added intended ambiguity by using 'far,' which may be adverbial or adjectival.
- {Line 7} Conj. 'but' was later placed before 'Lo<sup>3</sup>.' Ambiguity added again as the word 'but' may be conjunctive, adverbial & adjectival.
- {Line 8} Here, four words (One whose kingdom expands) are replaced by three words (whose realm increases). A six syllable set is decreased to five syllables to complete the rhythm of the line.
- {Line 10} In other forms it reads 'One true salvation to Him look and go! True salvation is later removed and replaced by reclamation<sup>4</sup>. Both, equally four syllables but reclamation provides nuance.
- {Line 11} Denouement<sup>5</sup> was found inscribed on only two pieces. One of two, which was the final reconstruction. The author definitely desired to summarize the poem's content in a single line.

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<sup>1</sup> Interj. 1. A call or cry to attract attention or give notice of approach.

<sup>2</sup> {ME. *witte*; AS. *wit*, knowledge, from *witan*, to know.}

<sup>3</sup> Interj. 1. Look, see, behold, observe, 2. Used to attract attention.

<sup>4</sup> {Fr. *reclamation*, a reclaiming or bringing back.} 1. Recovery or restoration to a better or useful estate, e.g. wasteland, desert

<sup>5</sup> {Fr., from *denouer*, to untie}The outcome, solution, unraveling or clarification of a plot in a drama, story, poem.

## COMMENTARY

The English critic John Ruskin once wrote, in his little pamphlet 'Sesame and Lilies,' "you must get into the habit of intensely looking at words, and assuring yourself of their meaning, syllable by syllable—nay, letter by letter." In the reading of a poem, it is quite a difficult task to enter into the author's text and in a real sense it is impossible.

Various literary techniques are often applied when trying to get behind the text or attempting to submerge one's self in the substrata and microstructures of a poem, but these are so very specialized that unless you master and utilize the vulgar speech within each critical community your assessment of a poem's quality is viewed as sub-par at best. Therefore, we review this poem cautiously.

Upon first reading, we find ourselves looking in vain for overt information on the identity of the author. Though we can surmise a few things from the wording and content, to be sure, conjecture is all

that will result. Our author is more than likely mature minded in his knowledge of religious ideas. He may have a superficial relationship with deity, but certainly not a shallow acquaintance with the documentary evidence from which he cites poetic material. The syntax betrays all of the elements one would normally find in the compacted phrases of a person who is touched by the classics; short, terse, choppy verbiage pregnant with imagery. He might have tried his hand at composing this, to the best of his ability, according to classical literature.

The poem above is a reminder to me of a nostalgic time when certain truths were universally accepted and not critically challenged; an age where the ascendancy of Christianity over (what had been termed) savage cultures was typically deemed a necessary correlative in the civilizing of mankind. This fragment is overflowing with this attitude and our author is fearless in his line by line declamations of these points.

So he writes with a flair for the bold and audacious. Whether or not this piece is the manifested ramblings of his own beliefs, or merely a few expressive musings, they relay, not so much the dogmas of his own heart, as they do what is commonly believed by Christian groups. If it is true that every poem contains many voices, then our writer was discursive only to the degree that he hammered home religious truth.

In many ways his lines are congested. However, with each new reading one still feels as though he or she is tip toeing through one of John Milton's gardens. Among Milton's many flowers is an air permeated with the fragrant scents of religion.

In some instances, our poem SO DIVINE reads as if composed in a vocative stance; written as if the things seen are able to hear and understand his exclamatory remarks. At other times, it hints at simple narration of fact; leading you along a guided tour of a life teeming with inspiration.

Toward the end I wondered if the Jewish superman himself was testifying. As if, looking backwards in hindsight and rehearsing the circumstances, which have placed Him in such lofty estates. Wherever one positions himself the vantage point is extremely picturesque.

Also, an ample mixture of earthiness and otherworldliness directs the reader's thought throughout. Though the language is a bit constrictive, the story is expansive. Each line bears a distinctive weight--in all cases, doctrinal, that the reader is encouraged to shoulder.

The entire poem consists of 89 syllables of readable verse. Other slight changes could have been made in the text to bring in sharper contours, but, the final shape of SO DIVINE bears the hallmarks of grandpa's thought, and so, should be left as is, absent of any further emendation.

There are eleven lines, none of which are longer than eleven syllables. The word below is thrice multiplied to emphasize place—and events in place I.E. personification, quietus, primacy. The rhythmic symmetry of this piece when vocalized and accented accordingly, is also aurally superb. There are five couplets, and if you are familiar with the contextual genre of each, then, the imaginative provocations are without end.

#### ALTERNATE MEANINGS

Approaching this poem with little, if any, knowledge of Jesus or Old Testament persons, one could very well discern in the first three couplets the story of a raindrop; falling from above and in due process of time rising again to its celestial fore. The remaining lines could signify the ever widening orbit of a star that appears to move in harmony with man; giving a sense of direction to those who follow. From primeval helmsmen to the ancient astrologer who saw stars as portents for travel, {much like the flight patterns of birds were viewed} stars were believed to be practical & handy in miscellaneous departments of life.

Note the single syllable contrasts involved with lines 1, 3, 5, 9. Our journey begins amid the celestial heavens, descending to a sphere where afflictions and infirmity appear to be the norm. All of which are supplanted by the rise and ascension of one who has engendered happiness among the common

species of men. Naturally, when I think of the sun, moon, sky and stars I envision what is seemingly untouchable. In view of this it seems surreal that one should descend from such an exalted state.

Why is the author using language such as “one from among you” in describing this person? The statement, conceivably, could be specious. For all we know it could be a cryptic code pointing to noticeable differences of class to be observed in the ensuing lines.

Of course, his perspective was shaped by popularly held opinions of the bible in his day; namely that scripture was inspired. In earlier days, all across the European continent little scholars were drilled in heroic Latin verse and educated in the rudiments of religion; and not just any religion but Christian religion. This would become a cultural phenomenon that would continue well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Certain depictions of one who is to come, who is like the bright morning star, who shines fairer than the moon—as Solomon's song declares, are clear allusions to the multiple designations of the Jewish redeemer. This poem is in one sense an illustrative portrayal of a divine messenger's mission, and in another sense a succinct chronicle of a supposed landmark event. Definitely written as if a watershed moment in time, the poem converses with the reader and does so in a rather loud tone of voice.

The concept of descension needs further discussion. The full idea of 'coming down' is enlarged by creatively arranging true to life scenes in a natural way. There are rays that descend from the sun, falling or shooting stars, and cascading skies at the end of the horizon. Even the moon seems to bow her head each morning in grief. Indeed, random & circular lowerings—descensions, of this order lend themselves to literary suggestion.

For His coming down party was appended with sorrow and tribulation, which entailed a tale of bloodshed and sadness. But what meaneth these bones in line four? The image of man's frame encased in soft flesh evidences human vulnerability. As one lays aside an old garment no longer useful, the human skeleton and its soft sinewy tissues, vulnerable to attack as well as defeat, were discarded; thereby, giving to our divine subject a beautiful seraphic glow.

Thus, by interweaving all of these elements into a poetic story, the author is able to call creation to bear witness to what he supposes to be an undeniable fact: that the elements stood by passively and watched as an event unfolded, which would reshape how all of natural history is retold.

The word 'cloud' in old English was a mass of earth or rock with 'wind,' originally meaning 'to go rapidly.' The poet, quite probably, is using these words as metaphors. Clouds-winds-earth-rain, each

is a symbol on a canvas harmoniously linked to tell a story. With earthy mass, below man's feet, as well as, overhead, roaring wind, having united with drops of rain conspired to hide a tale in their bosom. Each of them was privy to the painful death of a man and has refrained from pronouncement on the matter. Nevertheless, the man has exceeded each of them in terms of status, 'far above' (line 6) is a concept of abounding excellence.

The application of the title Son of David (line 7) recasts the descended one in the form or mode of a king; an able one whose 'vast domain' is ever increasing and always expanding.

This, in our minds, causes a sharp contrast. Yet, again we may justifiably return to the weaknesses of David and claim, in some fashion, a weakness attached to the Jewish sage named Jesus. Our author may be exploring some sort of filial relationship exhibited in the David-Yahweh link.

For the author, at least, Jesus is to be judged, be it right or wrong, as a royal personage, and to be understood against the backdrop of other kingly, albeit, human figures whose dominions were limited by their own military might and executive largesse. The frailty of creation is continually shown to be inadequate as line after line pictures Him as rising above and beyond temporal entities.

By unveiling Jesus in a linguistic style that elevates Him to unique status he is able to finish his argument by ascribing the new found 'joy and laud' in the earth unto the divine one's incarnation and presence.

Moreover, by switching from 'salvation to the word reclamation' (line 10), the SO DIVINE poet adds a special touch to the features of the poem. Reclamation points us toward a state of recovery.

The poet now subtly lamenting what he sees as the effects of mortality: corruption, degradation and the

devolution of man's human instincts. So in view of the magnitude of this extant dearth in character among men of dust, a rescue effort, from what was viewed in Medieval and ancient times as the plague of sin, is completed through his descension and ascension; the resultant being mirth and merriment in the four corners of the far flung world. The author writes as though you, the reader, would value an authenticated sense of mission accomplished.

Yes, 'tis true that people's minds were predisposed to conclusions then that are sure to be avoided by most today. The idea of a God/man in flesh is interesting to say the least, and does makes for good poetry, but it also elicits from modernists accusations of superstition.

Somehow our age has concluded that the intellectual genius of former days, which in many ways was guilty of provincialism, is out of step with today's multicultural mood and should, for all practical purposes, be abandoned. To our credit, all

have not followed down this pathway of narrow obscurantism.

Neither the date nor composition of a poem should be a hindrance in its evaluation and appreciation. That the style, meter, and macrostructure of poems from centuries ago differ from today are well known and attested. A casual glimpse at the modern verses of Donald Hall and the hyper poetic stories online are proof of this.

In some ways, the battles in the arena of literary composition call to mind the fifteenth century Ciceronian controversies over the humanities, or *studia humanitatis*.

There were those arguing that Latin must be written in the manner and style of Cicero in order for it to be genuine, and on the other side were those innovators and reformers who sought to develop an amalgamated form of high quality Latin that comprised the best of all of the classical scribes.

Far be it from me to denounce the scribal methods, techniques, and radical attempts of others, we ought to exhort any and all persons possessing poetic skills who have the will power to create pages of masterpiece literature--interesting works of art.

The poet finalizes with a summary line 'He journeyed from afar to be near, so hear!' It serves as a small footnote to an otherwise eternal life and evokes remembrance of the fourth line from Wm. R. Newells's popular old hymn At Calvary:

"Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan! Oh, the love that bro't it down to man! Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span At Calvary!"

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POSTSCRIPT: It seems that bibliophiles have a lot to give and I am glad that out of the ramblings of my own soul, I was able to craft this piece and allow fragments from the 'attic of my heart' to finally find a resting place.

Pastor Darrell Sutton

## Appendix

Would you win all the world for Christ?  
One way there is and only one;  
You must live Christ from day to day,  
And see His will be done. . . .

No easy way,--rough—strewn with stones,  
And wearisome, the path He trod.  
But His way is the only way  
That leads man back to God.

And lonesome oft, and often dark  
With shame, and outcastry, and scorn,  
And, at the end perchance a cross,  
And many a crown of thorn.

But His lone cross and crown of thorn  
Endure when crowns and empires fall,  
The might of His undying love  
In dying conquered all.

Only by treading in His steps  
The all-compelling ways of love,  
Shall earth be won, and man made one  
With that great love above.

John Oxenham