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Abstract

This essay offers a commentary on the four poems of Dr. Eville Gorham that accompany his memoir, “Reflecting on Life in a Deteriorating World: How Chance Made Me an Environmental Activist,” published elsewhere in this journal. Gorham’s poems are read here not only as complementing his development as a scientist but also for their literary merit as intriguing applications of a scientific perspective to nature poetry, one of the great traditions of the American and English lyric. His poems are associated here with the spare, imagistic mode of 20th-century modernism, particularly as defined by Ezra Pound and his followers, but also with the skeptical philosophical mode associated with such modernists as Wallace Stevens.

Edward M. Griffin

ABSTRACT

This essay offers a commentary on the four poems of Dr. Eville Gorham that accompany his memoir, "Reflecting on Life in a Deteriorating World: How Chance Made Me an Environmental Activist," published elsewhere in this journal. Gorham's poems are read here not only as complementing his development as a scientist but also for their literary merit as intriguing applications of a scientific perspective to nature poetry, one of the great traditions of the American and English lyric. His poems are associated here with the spare, imagistic mode of 20th-century modernism, particularly as defined by Ezra Pound and his followers, but also with the skeptical philosophical mode associated with such modernists as Wallace Stevens.

ON THE POEMS OF THE ACCIDENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST

These poems provide an intriguing complement to Eville Gorham's memoir, "Reflecting on Life in a Deteriorating World: How Chance Made Me an Environmental Activist."

The memoir sets an intellectual and emotional context for reading the poems. Although Gorham modestly defines his career as a series of happy accidents besetting an unusually fortunate fellow, beneath his geniality we recognize a rigorous devotion to acute observation and careful, thorough, experimentation undergirding his development as a distinguished scientist. The poems, I think, provide a certain twist to his personal narrative. Written and revised at various stages of his career, they seem to me the creation of a poet whose epistemology is that of the professional scientist. I prefer to think of them in that way instead of in the obverse: the ecologist/environmentalist who happens to dabble in poetry. I cannot consider him an accidental poet. To me, the poems speak first as art, then of science, particularly in their diction and their rhythms.

That diction and those rhythms remind me of the tenets of the Imagists, those early-twentieth-century modernist poets, chiefly American, who intended to reinvigorate British and American verse by rejecting the poetic language, styles, and moral sensibilities that Britain and Britain's American disciples had carried over from the nineteenth century. The Imagists adopted Ezra Pound's battle-cry: "Make it New! Make it New! Make it New!" And his three central doctrines:

“1) Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective. 2) Use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.” To which Pound added some crucial premises: “Consider the way of the scientists rather than the way of an advertising agent for a new soap. The scientist does not expect to be acclaimed as a great scientist until he has *discovered* something. He begins by learning what has been discovered already. He goes from that point onward.”

And Pound’s practical, insistent admonition: “I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use "symbols" he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that a sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk.”¹ For Pound it had better be an accurate hawk.

I have no idea whether Prof. Gorham has read Pound or the Imagists or has been influenced directly by them, but his unrhymed poems are in the modernist mode: direct treatment; economy and precision of diction; suppleness of rhythm.

Below, I want to contribute one extended analysis—of the poem “Rain” --to demonstrate my contention about the modernism of the poems. I’ll conclude with some more general comments upon the other poems.

I

RAIN

Autumn,

And the rain falls,

Melting from pristine snowflakes

Crystallized at the cloud’s top,

Splinters or patterned hexagons,

Their form a function of the eternal cold

Encroaching from the poles.

And centered at each crystal’s icy core

A fleck of dust swirled from a drying land
By winds that, ever restless, come and go,
Or yet a speck of salt flung from the sea,
Bubbled from out the swash of breaking wave,
Or the dead ash of some bright meteor's flare
Vanished but for the showers it sets in train.

All these may serve to bring to earth again
Vapor distilled under the summer sun
From land and wave-worn sea
Since time began.

"Rain," with its one-word, unadorned title, illustrates Pound's "direct treatment of the thing." The rain falls—an apparently commonplace statement—but this poem does not offer commonplaces about the rain. Instead, it peers intensely, rigorously, at rain itself, and it constructs a statement about the falling of the rain: from whence it falls; how it falls; and then, at the center of the poem, what the rain-drop *is* at its "icy core." Scientifically, the rain is a "function of the eternal cold/Encroaching at the poles." It falls "Melting from pristine snowflakes/Crystallized at the cloud's top" and forms into "Splinters or patterned hexagons." And at the center "of each crystal's icy core" the speaker locates "A fleck of dust" or "a speck of salt" or the "dead ash of some bright meteor's flare"—the trinity of land, sea, and air. Together, these properties "may serve to bring to earth again/Vapor distilled under the summer sun/From land and wave-worn sea/Since time began" in a perpetual cycle.

This is about as direct a treatment of the thing as one is likely to find. It is "the natural object," which, as Pound insists, "is always the *adequate* symbol."² Before it symbolizes anything, it has to work as what it is—the "hawk" has to be "a hawk" or, as here, the crystal has to be a crystal and the language must be precisely correct. And in this poem, it is—down to the fleck of dust at its icy core. Moreover, it uses no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

Furthermore, I find the rhythmical arrangement of the poem remarkable. In their tempo, the first four lines of the seven-line stanzas, both typographically and metrically, capture the motion of the rain's falling and crystallizing. I hear each line ending in an unaccented syllable (a "falling" accent), heightened by the anapests (two unaccented followed by an accented syllable) in "And the **rain**" plus "ing from **prist**" and "allized **at**." (There's possibly a subtle and sly word game in line one, as "Autumn" of course, is commonly called "Fall.") These lines link to lines of statement, careful observation of the object: "Splinters or patterned hexagons" whose form follows their function: their purpose is to manifest the "eternal cold" that moves ("Encroaching") from the poles to us. (I've set the accented syllables in bold face.)

Typographically, the endings of the first four lines cascade down (two syllables, four syllables, seven syllables, seven syllables) to settle at line four, which in a very nice touch, reaches back to the point of origin of the rain: the top of the cloud from which the rain falls.

Autumn,

And the **rain** falls,

Melting from **pristine snowflakes**

Crystallized at the **cloud's** top,

The second—center--stanza brings a microscopic, fixed, focus to the center of the crystal.

And centered at each crystal's icy **core**

A fleck of dust swirled from a drying **land**

By winds that, ever restless, come and **go**,

Or yet a speck of salt flung from the **sea**,

Bubbled from out the swash of breaking **wave**,

Or the dead ash of some bright meteor's **flare**

Vanished but for the showers it sets in **train**.

The metrical scheme here is appropriately steady and regular, iambic pentameter with some traditional substitutions in the fifth and sixth lines, each line ending with stressed monosyllable--as befits this kind of stable close-up peering at the object. Yet for each fleck of dust or speck of salt or dead ash, there is an accompanying comment, a note in the lab report, inferring its point of origin: dry land and wind; the sea and a wave; and—in a surprising and dramatic close—the flare of bright but now vanished meteor.

The first two stanzas nicely fulfill the crucial requirements of the Imagist program: 1) direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective. 2) Use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

Only then, in the final stanza, does the speaker offer a commentary, and that commentary is properly couched in *tentative* scientific language: "All these may serve to bring to earth again" the vapor distilled from land and wave-worn sea (a reaching back to stanza two) since time began. "Since time began" is the understated argument of the poem. Nothing else is needed. The natural object is always the adequate symbol. If it is directly, accurately, precisely rendered, it is a sufficient vehicle of meaning. And this rain-crystal, in this poem, is a darned good hawk.

I should mention as well the diction of the poem—at critical places words that convey the appropriate form of motion necessary to the process being analyzed. Consider *melting, crystallized, encroaching, swirled, flung, bubbled, swash, flare, vanished, and distilled*. A respect for precision of language permeates the text. So much scientific writing is resolutely passive. No active verbs allowed, under the pretense that the observer has no agency except observation. Not so here: the verbs are alive and the world is in motion. It is a poem about rain, not the versified abstract of a journal article.

II

OCTOBER

The aspen leaves glow golden

In the cooling air

As leaves of oak,

Incarnadined by natural alchemy,

Flame in the paling sky,

The wind rises as night falls

And the birds gather,

Restless for the south.

The most famous Imagist poem is Pound's "In a Station of the Metro."³

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound's poem is Imagism in its most rigorous form. Each element functions as interposition with the others. The image: "Petals on a wet, black bough." One terse line of perspective: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd." And a terse line of explanation serving double-duty as a title: "In a station of the Metro." (The title is not what Pound would call "ornament." It is an indispensable part of the poem.)

Compare Gorham's "October." Two leaf images, aspen and oak, the first glowing golden, the second "Incarnadined" (echo of *Macbeth*: "The multitudinous seas incarnadine/Making the green one red")⁴ A sentence of explanation: "The wind rises as night falls/And the birds gather/Restless for the south." The title is superimposed upon the poem to add specificity (as "In a Station of the Metro.") Imagism. The objects are rendered and speak for themselves. No ornaments. No other lesson to needs to be drawn. (For a contrasting sensibility on the same subject, see Robert Frost's "October" at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/238116>)

III

FALL

Seeming uncertain of their way the leaves descend,

Drawn to the forest floor in quiet flight.

We also fall, and falling turn the wheel of Nature round.

Her creatures, one with us, our dying flesh devour

And turn to air, seeming to set us free.

Yet freedom's span is short, and air is soon enchained

In leafy labyrinths wherein life's fetters once again are forged.

Bonds such as once bound us now bind anew

The unfolding leaves, destined – like us – to fall.

Gorham's "Fall" is much more Frost-like, and it seems to be an experiment in sound: the sibilants "Seeming uncertain . . . leaves descend; seeming to set us free; span is short"), the "f" alliteration, beginning with the title word ("forest floor . . . flight; fall, falling; life's fetters . . . forged; folding . . . fall" (to bracket the title word). And the other alliterations, such as "dying . . . devout; leafy labyrinths' bound us . . . bind"). The theme of falling, so prevalent in his verse generally, and our eventual completion of the life cycle by merging with the natural world and turning the wheel of Nature round, insists on itself in this poem, and the diction deliberately draws attention to itself in a way that it does not elsewhere in his verse. And it's clearly done for fun, a kind of showy display of poetical devices that never gets out of control.

The style, the manner, of "An Agnostic's Redemption" resembles, it seems to me, that of the "native plain style," a major mode of verse during the Renaissance that literary historians now compare and contrast to its competitor, the "ornate" style that incorporates foreign influences in its complexity of diction and meter, its use of elaborate patterns of speech and conversation.

In the plain style, best explained long ago by the formidable critic Yvor Winters, we find deliberately plain language employed in a manner of direct address to an imagined audience of plain-talking people. It is a poetry of statement: this is the way the world is, with no frills, no fancy wrappings. The *thought* of the line is generally coterminous *with* the line. The thought ends when the line ends, and the next line continues with its own thought. Without interruptions, asides, parenthetical insertions, the line marches regularly across the page, generally pausing, if at all, only at the center, and each statement seldom spills over to the next. Winters's favorite example is "Of Money," a poem by Barnabe Googe (1540-1594)

OF MONEY

Give money me, take friendship whoso list.

For friends are gone, come once adversity,

When money yet remaineth safe in chest,

That quickly can thee bring from misery.

Fair face show friends when riches do abound;
Come time of proof, farewell, they must away.
Believe me well, they are not to be found
If God but send thee once a lowering day.
Gold never starts aside, but in distress
Finds ways enough to ease thine heaviness.⁵

Here is Gorham's poem:

IV

AN AGNOSTIC'S REDEMPTION

In the end is the beginning. The pattern of life dissolves,
Atoms and molecules go their separate ways
As they have done since first the earth began
And we, perforce, must share their journeying.

Breath fleeting on the pinions of the wind,
Tears flowing to the saltness of the sea,
Blood pulsing to the rhythm of the tides,
Flesh kindling anew the flame of life.

So to take part in all the earth's renewing
Sufficient heaven should be for anyone.

This poem is a parody of traditional confessions of faith and an implicit rebuke to the true Believer. To me, its matter-of-fact style contrasts with that of Gorham's "October," which strikes me

as deliberately more ornate. In “An Agnostic’s Redemption,” the ironical title—why does an agnostic speaker need redemption, and from what?—leads directly to a series of categorical, even aphoristic, statements: “In the end is the beginning.” “The pattern of life dissolves.” “Atoms and molecules go their separate ways.” “As they have since first the earth began.”

There you are: the observable facts of life firmly and bluntly stated. And the facts add up to a plainly stated lesson: “And we, perforce, must share their journeying.” There follows a travelogue of our swift and inevitable journeying into dissolution. Breath, Tears, Blood, Flesh/fleeting/flowing/pulsing/kindling relentlessly, joining the wind’s pinions, the sea’s salt, the tides’ rhythm, and life’s flame.

This is the *Credo* of the agnostic biologist. Yet, the language itself seems to belie any agnostic hesitancy; there’s no “maybe” or “perhaps” in it, as there is no “maybe” in “Of Money.” Googe says, “must, are not, never”; Gorham confidently says “perforce.” And the closing couplet, as in “Of Money,” firmly states the case: this is the only redemption we humans have—“to take part in all the earth’s renewing.” And it is the only heaven we are journeying to. We should be glad of it, because our end is also a beginning. Unstated, but present from the title of the poem to the end, is a refutation of the Believer’s *Credo*, never directly challenged in the poem until the concluding line but lurking behind each stanza. The speaker can assume a reader who already knows the Believer’s position and can see the Agnostic’s departures from it.

American poetry has had its share of manifestos such as this one. William Cullen Bryant’s “Thanatopsis,” for instance, consoles the reader with the news that:

“Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolv’d to earth again;
And, lost each human trace, surrend’ring up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix forever with the elements.

Or, by contrast, the much more aggressive, scolding mode in Wallace Stevens’s “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” and a gentler tone—one much more like that of the speaker in “An Agnostic’s Redemption”—in Stevens’s “Sunday Morning.” There a woman sits on her porch as her neighbors head off to church:

She hears, upon that water without sound,
A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.⁶

Although the Accidental Environmentalist Activist does not trouble himself to mock the claims of his Christian neighbors, he, in his matter-of-fact fashion, and Stevens's woman, in her Sunday meditation, reach similar resolutions, the theme persisting in both the memoir and the poems. I am more the Believer than Gorham is, and my soul needs more consolation than he offers, but then I am not an activist environmentalist. And the calm integrity of this position moves me nonetheless.

So to take part in all the earth's renewing
Sufficient heaven should be for anyone.

¹ For detailed statements of Pound's "Imagist Manifesto," see <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237886> and <http://www.poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/pound.html>. Originals first published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, March 1913.

² "Don't use such an expression as "dim lands of *peace*." It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol." From Pound, "Language" in "A Retrospect." See: <http://www.poetspath.com/transmissions/messages/pound.html>

³ First published in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, April 1913. For www version, see: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse/2/1#!/20569746/1>

⁴ *Macbeth*. II.2.59.

⁵ For a modern edition, see *Barnabe Googe—Eglogs, Epytaphes, and Sonettes*. London: Hesperides Press, 2008. For Winters on the "plain style," see "Aspects of the Short Poem in the English Renaissance" in Yvor Winters, *Forms of Discovery: Critical & Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1967.

⁶ For “Thanatopsis,” see <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180813>. For “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” and “Sunday Morning,” see <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176867> and <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/2464>