

I Mathew Arnold considered that poetry should express 'high seriousness'

Well, the first prediction didn't last very long, Since T.S Eliot passed away there has been hardly anything resembling religion or philosophy in modern poetry.

But what about the other quotation? Is there anything at all in the poetry of the present day which could be honestly described as any kind of 'high seriousness' whatsoever?

What could be defined as 'high seriousness' in poetry today anyway

Define 'high seriousness.'

Is there a difference between 'low' and 'high' seriousness?

Does high seriousness preclude humour, irony, pop-cultural references (Geoffrey Hill referencing Jimi Hendrix for instance), the demotic language of the street, and if so why?

Maybe when we've determined what high seriousness is we can decide whether contemporary poetry has it or not.

Modern poetry is full of 'religion' and 'philosophy'! It is, perhaps, simply not stereotypical of tight, traditional ideas. That is a very strange statement, Harry. Would you enlarge upon it a bit. IMO, 'high seriousness' is one of those nonsense phrases coined by self-important academic types, full of hot air and meaning nothing. Let them throw such conversational gambits at each other in cloistered closets, like chattering monkeys, vocally grooming each other. Such a phrase is a denial of real wisdom.

At this moment - I breathe - and that is high seriousness.

I greatly appreciate and honour academic types who have good sense, which they also exercise by sporting no halo of superiority.

'High seriousness' would for me be a step beyond all this soul searching and experience crunching - a look outside at the world beyond.

Don't take me too seriously in my criticism. I write plenty of poetry inspired by my own experiences of life - it's how we relate to the world - I do it as a hobby though - with no expectation that it will stay in the memory of anyone, beyond a couple of days.

Highly serious poetry for me has to say something worthwhile and in a way that makes it poetic and what makes a poem poetic - you could argue about that till the cows come home...

Arnolds definition of the presence (and absence) of his high seriousness is:

'So far as high poetic truth and seriousness are wanting to a poet's matter and substance, so far also, we may be sure, will a high poetic stamp of diction and movement be wanting to his style and manner. In proportion as this high stamp of diction and movement, again, is absent from a poet's style and manner, we shall find, also, that high poetic truth and seriousness are absent from his substance

and matter. The poems Arnold has used to 'put his money where his mouth is' are commonly used as examples of 'high and serious' poetry...Arnold hasn't really said why...

anybody else got any idea? In truth, I think language just evolves. All this classical poetry that Harry favours gives me a headache if I read too much of it. I like modern poetry because, on the whole, it is much easier to understand. There IS highly serious stuff out there - in with the less so - for me variety is all. For a poem to stand out, it just has to say something in a different way.

Which makes me suspect that one element of 'high seriousness' is elitism.

Another side to it is taking writing seriously, on the other hand. Well written poems have little or no floundering language that looks redundant.

Redundancy in spoken language is very useful, because when we are listening to speech there are distractions, and if we miss a point once, it needs to be repeated so we don't miss it again. If you are giving instructions you are encouraged to repeat the points in several different ways so people get the message. In speeches you get lots of repetition, so that the words become mantras or sound bites. 'Yes we can'

So if poetry is to be read aloud, repetition is useful. Good poetry builds the repetition into the patterns of the poem so it belongs. That's why folk songs have choruses too.

However, 'serious' poetry is by implication the stuff you read in a book in a quiet place, so you can concentrate. It is possible therefore to develop a style which needs concentration, so that no word will be lost. In fact words can be condensed and ideas encapsulated in phrases that are difficult to understand, because you have time to work it out, and can feel that you have a common culture with the writer if you can construe what they have written. This leads to an elitism about cultural references, so lots of readers are put off, because they don't get the references, and reviewers can interpret the meanings, and show off their share of the culture. Actually any shared culture can be used in this way. Ezra Pound used Greek for example, but street slang can be just as exclusive if you want to create barriers or make people work hard to understand you.

You don't have to be hard to understand to write seriously of serious topics. The 'high' bit is what suggests elitism.

The words are those of a responsible ruler (high and serious status) to a personified sleep. (a high and serious personification) Who is complaining of not being able to sleep at a time of danger. The Ship boy is physically in a high position with a serious responsibility for the safety of the ship and crew and is therefore in a high and serious analogous situation to the king, and yet he is able to fall asleep. the words `giddy` and `imperious` and `surge` `rock` `brains` plus `rude imperious surge` all refer to the perilous situation and responsibilities of both the boy and the king. (the king politically, the boy ` physically)

The extract is from the start of the second part of King Henry 1V. and comes in the midst of that superb section that contrasts the luxurious (but sleepless) situation of a king in a palace with the situation of those who sleep soundly in `smoky cribs` or `vile` in `loathsome beds`...the

section- high and serious in itself – is a marvellously tense beginning to the high and serious business of the play itself. The section is fairly short and rewards close reading. It ends with the now famous 'Uneasy lies the head which wears the crown'

To me, high and serious poetry has to deal with big questions and has to hook the reader into engaging with those questions.

In Every Grain of Sand Dylan is asking questions - he is "hanging in the balance". He asks whether God can be experienced - "I hear the ancient footsteps like the motion of the sea, Sometimes I turn, there's someone there, other time it's only me".

He is exploring how to deal with what chokes the "breath of conscience and good cheer", and how God can be involved in that - at the deepest psychological level (the "dying voice" from the "deepest need").

He is also opening up the tension between knowledge and experience. Understanding that every hair is numbered is all very well (verse 4), but what about wealth and poverty, loneliness and lost innocence (verse 5). This is what leaves him "hanging in the balance".

R S Thomas is full of questions. A Welsh Testament explores national identification and feeling and the extent to which our heritage shapes our lives. It asks what is to be done with uneconomic Welsh uplands and whether, if they are to be treated as drab, grey museums, 'authentic' Welsh people should be condemned to live there.

There's no shortage of big questions in modern poetry though there may not be anyone with the stature of Shakespeare writing in English.

Arnold says:

'So far as high poetic truth and seriousness are wanting to a poet's matter and substance, so far also, we may be sure, will a high poetic stamp of diction and movement be wanting to his style and manner. In proportion as this high stamp of diction and movement, again, is absent from a poet's style and manner, we shall find, also, that high poetic truth and seriousness are absent from his substance and matter.'

The 'matter' and 'substance' of this poem is hugely serious.

(The poem is a translation so some of the linguistic nuances in the original German I can't deal with.)

The question (Arnold's) is; does the diction and movement in this poem do justice to the High seriousness of his theme.

Although the poem was published in the late forties and was therefore a very early (maybe the original) prefiguration of the appalling conditions of labour and the gangster-like brutality of the camp regimes, which later became a regular part of the depiction of life therein. As such it's modern impressionistic style is quite effective. The dogs the bullets the snakes the sword all

place the reader where it is actually happening, wearily over-arched by dismal dawntime and duskttime.

Where I think it fails Arnolds test of diction and movement are those parts of the poem:

Margareta, Shulamite, and the inclusion of music – and dance (as a macabre danse of death ?)

etc; which – to me- somehow place the main shame of

the Nazi brutality in a decline from some sort of formerly shared

culturally artistic height. To me such brutality is not primarily a crime against culture or artistry,

it's a crime against Human Nature itself.

Perhaps a quote from Shakespeare might `get` at what I mean:

`I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge`

Interesting reading, Harry. Not sure he just puts the blame on culture though - except that German cultural icons and anti-semitism run side-by-side in German culture up till the 2nd World War. So although it's definitely a human failing, it's also a cultural failing and he's coming at the human failing through the culture. I think a lot of German art post-war is also heavily sarcastic (Baselitz turning his paintings upside down, novels like the Tin Drum). As if the only kind of honest reaction was a kind of savage hysterical laughter. As well as being highly serious it's probably also a rejection of 'high seriousness' in the Arnoldian sense, which for many post-war writers and artists had completely failed.

It seems that rhyme has almost completely vanished from any modern poetry which aims to be either high or serious (or even merely earnest).

I think that the power of this comes even more from the rhyme than from the imagery.

Can anyone `match` the power of this with a similar quote from a past or present-day unrhymed, free verse quote from one of their own favourites?

And could they use the quotes to point out the strengths or the weaknesses of either?. It might help to explain something about the mysterious absence of rhyme in modern serious poetry.

I am interested in the fact that this extract is almost all one sentence, so that the rhymes, although placed at the end of lines, are very much internal to the structure. As the lines are not conforming to a rhythm pattern, the effect is not as repetitive as it would be in a regular rhythm, so the rhymes seem to slide in quietly. I think it is regular rhythm which these days seems contrary to seriousness..