

A Bower Quiet: can the Romantics defy adversity?

Verse-makers, it is commonly agreed, are well-versed in adversity. This is, self-evidently, no accident, for all these words stem from the Latin *vertere*, 'to turn'. Verse, we might say, is linguistically ordained to help us to cope with adversity. Events turn against us, and plunge us into hardship. A poet meets this turn of events with a turn of phrase, a turn onto a new line, and, perhaps, we are consoled.

'A thing of beauty', after all, 'is a joy forever'. So Keats reminds us in 'Endymion', and this is poetry's lasting power: we can access such things of beauty in times of adversity, and escape. Poetry 'will keep/A bower quiet for us, and a sleep/Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing', and no matter how troublesome our real lives may be, we can retreat to this 'bower'. The enigmatic ability of literature to relate to times other than its own is strikingly displayed here: Keats' association of joy with 'health, and quiet breathing' is inescapably pertinent in a time when health has been our chief preoccupation, when 'quiet breathing' brings to mind only ventilators and hospital wings. More than ever, we need poetry to provide these 'sweet dreams' for us; and Keats' own poetry is the superlative 'joy forever', transporting us variously to groves with nightingales on Hampstead Heath, or to the islands of the Aegean out of Chapman's Homer, worlds away from our worries closer to home. Far from being 'writ in water' as he so poignantly feared, Keats is safeguarded for all time as an eternal means of escape.

Because they pay such attention to the beauty of the external world, the Romantic poets crystallise these moments of escape for us most of all. If we have lost our enchantment with nature, Keats' ever-evocative ode to a 'season of mists and mellow fruitfulness' can open our eyes to it, and all the joy it offers us. Or if we have lost hope, Shelley's skylark 'singing hymns unbidden' may bring us, as it brings the speaker, the 'gladness' that the human world, whose 'sincerest laughter/With some pain is fraught', so needs. Throughout, the beauty of nature is captured, even when we might fear for its survival in the future. Whatever happens, however we might feel, we can return to autumn and the skylarks, enshrined in writing forever.

Poetry therefore takes great power from its permanence. Conversely, its treatment of impermanence is equally key; so often, it reminds us that things will pass, that turns of events will change and be forgotten as turns of verse will not. Take Shelley's 'Ozymandias', which captures a tyrant at the height of his hubris: 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;/Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!' Yet it soon captures that tyrant's fall: 'Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare/The lone and level sands stretch far away.' Like Ozymandias, adversity may seem at times to be eternal and omnipotent. But it never is. In the first few months of a new American president after four years of seemingly endless crisis, Shelley's message is more powerful than ever.

Far from being a dying art, poetry seems to take on new significance daily. A much-quoted line of Seamus Heaney's reminds us that 'once in a lifetime/The longed for tidal wave/Of justice can rise up/And hope and history rhyme.' That 'rhyme' with 'lifetime' swells with hope. Perhaps the order of poetry, of metre and rhyme, is another reason it is so effective as a coping mechanism: in a world of chaos, of unpredictability and confusion, it introduces patterns and arrangements, giving us the immense satisfaction of hearing an anticipated rhyme, an echoed rhythm, a repeated line. It provides a refuge from adversity, not only in content, in Keats' nightingales or Greek oceans, but in form. It provides a world with rules that will not be broken (for even broken forms are conforming to the writer's intent); and every decision

will be finely considered, carefully refined, never futile or frustrating as much of real life can be.

So often we see poetry as sad, as dealing best with 'saddest thought', as Shelley laments of human songs in 'To a Skylark'. 'Endymion', which so adumbrates the joys of poetry, was nonetheless dedicated to Thomas Chatterton, a significant poetic influence on the Romantics who committed suicide at just seventeen. The stereotype of the weebegone man in a lonely garret, epitomised by Keats and Chatterton, would suggest the same. Yet it is the poets who most face adversity who most bring us out of it; for it takes 'a World of Pains and Troubles' to know happiness when one finds it, to enshrine it in literature, and to pass it on to those in need of it. Keats and Shelley lived short, tragic lives marked by unhappiness. It is no accident that they can help us most of all when we in turn are sad, because of the fresh wonder they find in happiness once gained. The 'sweetest songs' of the human race may deal with 'saddest thought', but Shelley's poem makes it abundantly clear that nothing improves the mood quite like the 'clear keen joyance' of the songbird.

In times of adversity, we need hope. Poetry, as our highest form of communication, can best provide it. Few political speeches will stick in the mind quite like Amanda Gorman's reminder in 'The Hill We Climb' that 'there is always light,/if only we're brave enough to see it./If only we're brave enough to be it.' Such captivating word-craft remains with us, to be returned to when we need it – if we practise the underrated art of memorising poetry, we might even murmur it to ourselves when we require reassurance. Like a prayer, we might follow Keats in crying 'Sweet Hope, ethereal balm upon me shed,/And wave thy silver pinions o'er my head.' And the very beauty of the words as we recite them may take us part of the way there.

Word count: 1000