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How Short Can a Short Poem Be?

One of the most celebrated Christian epigrams is this:

> **Betwixt the stirrup and the ground,**
> **Mercy I ask?d; mercy I found.**
>
> ?Epitaph for a Man Killed by Falling? by William Camden (1551?1623)

A split second is time for amendment of life. Some Christians believe the essence of their faith is contained in those fifteen syllables. They move abruptly as octameter couplets do, mimicking a rearing horse. That?s a complete poem.

In my hunt for super-brief poems I?m not concerned here with that recent coinage, flash poetry. Most ?flash poems? weigh in longer than Camden?s fifteen syllables, or the seventeen-ish syllables of the Japanese *haiku*. This article will consider the triplet too long and the ballad quatrain positively otiose.

As Camden has shown, a good deal is down to context.

I think most of the best hermetically sealed short poems fall into two catagories, the epigram and the *haiku.* Both, at their most expressive, rely on a gigantic backdrop: in the epigram a journey through the hinterland of time, in the *haiku* an unending, problematic and evolving relationship with our natural world. It would be easy enough to show that the self-contained epigram is particularly good at insults and satire. So it is, as in Dorothy Parker?s long-running ?News Item?:

> **Men seldom make passes**
> **At girls who wear glasses.**

At its ambitious best, the epigram is surely the most reliable short-short form in English. Yes, it serves slogan-mongers, political cartoonists, advertising copywriters, football chants, etc., but it can be put to much costlier purposes: by pragmatists of theology like Camden, for celebrants of love and sex in a world circumscribed by time, for political commentators who think in centuries, not days or weeks, and for purveyors of *memento mori* for use on graves, the most celebrated of which is John Gay?s summary of his earthly experience:

> **Life is a jest; and all things show it,**
> **I thought so once; but now I know it.**

This is Emily Dickinson on the human adventure, a view like that of Hardy?s semi-doomed humans looking on at a lunar eclipse.

In this short Life that only lasts an hour
How much ? how little ? is within our power.

Beckett, unsurprisingly, delighted in such divine economy. In *Godot* he gets hold of a couplet someone, possibly the Elizabethan poet Robert Greene, made by loosely translating some words of Augustine:

Do not DESPAIR one of the thieves was SAVED;
Do not PRESUME one of the thieves was DAMNED.

Those lines introduce a fairly extensive trip round human psychology, as good theology should, not least a recognition that the thieves in Luke?s version of the Gospel (Luke 23:39-43) draw authority, not opprobrium, from their marginal positions in society. Both are convicted larcenists. One, embittered, ?reviles? Jesus, the other, open-minded, trusts him. Augustine (or Greene?s) words set in motion a cosmic see-saw, where optimism too readily shades into complacency, and despair into fatalism, and two thieves show the rest of us the way.

Short-short poems, therefore, can ask very tough questions about the nature of religion. They?re also good exposing those false hopes that twinkle about politics. The long views entailed in in such poems also tend to modify despair. Here is a tough late piece from William Butler Yeats on the permanent social divisions of modern Ireland:

Parnell

Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man:
?Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone.?

Kipling has a famous two-line ?Epitaph? on the fallen of World War One:

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

One of Benjamin Franklin?s Poor Richard maxims says a lot about the kind of sanctimonious shrewdness that so often wins out in wartime:

?Love thy neighbour; yet don?t pull down your hedge.?

If you?ve done with religion and politics, the other topic you shouldn?t discuss at the dinner table, and which short poems do particularly well, is sex. Again concentration of effect is everything. There?s much to say about sex that has to be said every time, otherwise there would be little point in it. So a few choice squelches in a tightly-packed verse can be very evocative, as e.e. cummings shows in this little vertical dramatization of intercourse. The poem is earth-moving in a number of ways, not least because the thought of cummings?s lady runs vertically, where the preferred position is horizontal. It also has the compulsiveness of a riddle. See how long it takes you to work it out:

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O
h
LoW
h
myGODye
ss

If that?s strong meat, one you might try on your friends is Robert Browning?s witty Rhyme for a Child

Viewing a Naked Venus in a Painting of ?The Judgment of Paris?(1872), which says so much about the vigilance and vulnerability of childhood innocence, even in High Victorian times:

He gazed and gazed and gazed and gazed,
Amazed, amazed, amazed, amazed.

If you need a peek at that over-familiar literary landscape of adultery, try this from Roger McGough:

Your finger
sadly
has a familiar ring
about it

Sex is a place of uncertainty, transgression and nostalgia. So much to feel and say, so little space to write it. And it takes two: a salutary opening up for the sometimes onanistically inclined short poem.

In all the best short poems, then, there is difference between me and you, between the wronged and the wronging, between Parnell and the cheering man, between McGough?s persona and all those ?familiar? lost lovers. These poems offer us cramped street-corners for their miniature disputes, but spaces big enough for debate and identity. Here?s a very weird one, by Coleridge, clearly expressing human diversity in the form of a mis-match between Eagles and Tortoises:

Let Eagle bid the Tortoise sunward soar?
As vainly Strength speaks to a broken Mind.

What was in Coleridge?s mind when he wrote that? The spectacle of a tortoise soaring sunward recalls the familiar anecdote of the death of the dramatist, Aeschylus, where a tortoise seems to have done just that in the claws of an eagle, only to fall from a great height on the playwright?s head. For all its Classical afflatus, though, the poem?s central idea is brilliantly grotesque, a surreal animation, something that happens in Coleridge poems when we get near to the heart of the mystery, to ?those slimy things? which ?did crawl with legs?, and which nevertheless have to be blessed in the ?Ancient Mariner?. In these two lines Coleridge gets in sublimity, ridicule, aspiration, suffering and even humour, plus a use of intertextuality to rival *The Waste Land*. That?s what a short poem can do.

I will end with the shortest recognised poetic form in the literary world, the Japanese *haiku*, which uses 17 syllables in Japanese (the heroic couplet needs 20), but in English, if it can be managed at all, must be allowed the leeway to come in shorter or longer. The *haiku* has the advantage of a fixed theme, and a resonant one: the impact of contemplation of nature, or more accurately, the cosmos, on the compromises of human endeavour. The most celebrated *haiku* in English is this, accorded a place in every anthology since its composition during the first flush of Modernism, in 1913. It ?cuts? from a vista of Modernist Paris to something like the fallen petals of cherry bloom in an oriental spring, splicing one image into another as a *haiku* must:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Compared with the most celebrated Japanese *haiku*s, like this by the master Basho, Pound?s work seems agitated, as if his Metro line might run through Eliot?s Waste Land, and his commuters meet Death by Water in the cruel city. Basho, by contrast, is all contemplation. He views moon-watching as a priest-like task, and insists the clouds, which interrupt this vigil, are on our side:

From time to time
The clouds give rest
To the moon beholders

Or perhaps there are no ?sides?, no friction between humanity and nature, when we stare into timeless depths beyond artfully broken clouds. Where Pound defines Modernist fragmentation, Basho contemplates Timeless purpose.

Writing good *haiku* in English, especially to please the purist, demands an almost miraculous sense of form, and an even more miraculous restraint. I think the Gothic poet Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-49) achieves that here, in one of my favourite very short poems. It is topographic, mythopoeic and fanciful, all at the same time.

A Lake

A lake
Is a river curled and asleep like a snake.

Here the ?cut? is an attempt to define a lake via the pressure of the rivers that create and sustain it. All those dynamic currents are lost in the coil of the watery snake, not Satan this time, but sleeping giant.

Little poems, then, need to feed on a great deal of experience, dare one almost say on history, as often in literature a case of ?infinite riches in a little room.? Consider this, by the Harlem Renaissance poet, Langston Hughes:

It?s such a
Bore
Being always
Poor.

Somewhere behind this is Christ?s wistful comment that the ?poor are with you always?, where ?poor? and ?you? are not synonymous. Hughes?s speaker also chooses the languid understatement of the flâneur, ? this is a ?cool? poem about poverty. He calls it ?Ennui?. So it refuses to protest too much: which half-conceals its crucial alignment with the history of African-Americans and the bread-lines of the depression. A good short poem should range widely, entwine the content of several university courses, touch on love, sex, spring, or death (one of those) and ask for plenty in the margin besides our thanks.

Works Cited

https://www.poetrynook.com/tags/short-poems?pages 1-2535 [1] A very extensive resource, though there are some duplicates, and many items are untranslated.

On Love and Barley: Haiku of Basho, introduced and translated by Lucien Stryk (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis, introduced by Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin 2011)

Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Writings,* ed. Ormond Seavey (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

The work of all the poets discussed is readily available, often online.

Source URL (modified on 06/02/2020 - 13:50): http://writersinspire.org/content/how-short-can-short-poem-be

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[1] https://www.poetrynook.com/tags/short-poems?pages%201-2535