

Emotions and words - can we be moved by Milton?

Can language describe emotions? Malcolm Hebron tries to answer this by looking at two very different poets - Edward Thomas and John Milton.

I wrote this in the wake of the catastrophe of the 2003 Columbia space shuttle mission, in which, as we know, all seven astronauts were killed. How can one find words for such a disaster, or for the feelings it arouses? 'Horrible' and 'disaster' are themselves, after all, weakened by over-use. A few days later, on the radio show *Front Row*, the presenter Mark Lawson asked the eminent linguist Jean Aitchison to comment on the broadcast message of someone who had to speak publicly about it, namely President Bush. Had his words matched the occasion? Did he measure up to the famous earlier speech of President Reagan on the Challenger craft, which blew up just a few seconds after take-off? Well, Professor Aitchison replied, President Bush had succeeded up to a point, but the problem he faced was simply that 'language isn't very good at describing emotions' (or words to that effect).

Language isn't very good at describing emotions? To us students of literature, these words may at first seem obviously wrong - counter-intuitive, as we say. For are we not reading about heightened states of emotion in literature all the time? Isn't that one of the main reasons we read poetry, to see our deepest feelings put into words, and through our imagination to experience new ones? Yes to both, is my answer. But experts don't say such things lightly, and it is worth pondering Professor Aitchison's statement: it takes us into important questions about literary language and how we respond to it.

First of all, it is quite true that language is not very good at directly describing emotions. We can name roughly what we are feeling - I'm happy, I'm depressed - but that doesn't give a very clear idea of what's going on inside us, or how our present mood is distinct from someone else's, or even another kind of happiness or sadness we ourselves had a week ago. There are infinite shades of sadness and joy. Experience is particular, and language is general. So when we make statements like 'I am desolated', or 'It was very moving', however sincere they are, they are just too abstract and general to be adequate to the unique facts of an individual case. In today's therapy-mad culture, which encourages us to talk openly about our feelings, this realisation can be surprising. When we're asked to speak what we feel, we're actually being asked to do something very difficult, if not impossible. Perhaps there are better ways of understanding our feelings than by talking about them.

Poetry in emotion

Still, literature is talk, written down, so how do poets go about conveying and evoking emotions? Very often, we find, feelings are not stated at all. Instead, we are given images and these communicate a feeling. Images can work on us in subtle and penetrating ways. Here is a complete poem, 'Tall Nettles' by Edward Thomas:

*Tall nettles cover up, as they have done
These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough
Long worn out, and the roller made of stone:
Only the elm butt tops the nettles now.*

*This corner of the farmyard I like most:
As well as any bloom upon a flower
I like the dust on the nettles, never lost
Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.*

'I like' is the only direct thing the poet says about his emotions in this immaculate piece, yet the images surely evoke something much deeper: the rusting tools and the overgrown farmyard suggest loss, decay and mortality. They induce in us a vivid awareness of the brevity of life and the vanity of human enterprise. Then there is the never-ending cycle of nature, which is far stronger than man's feeble attempts to control it with roller and plough. There is the picture of growth in the nettles and the final image of sweetness and cleansing, which hints at a spiritual grace and refreshment. It is the objects, and the world of thoughts and memories which they carry with them, which make the poem so moving. Just saying something like 'It was sad' gets nowhere near the bitter-sweet richness of this inner journey.

'Tall Nettles' is a short poem, expressing an important personal experience. It captures the sort of moment which might take us by surprise on any day. In just eight lines it lifts us to a special plane of feeling. And it speaks of themes of life and death which must be common to us all. But what happens when a poem does none of these things - when it is long and involved, not obviously expressing a personal experience and dealing with topics which might be alien to our own lives? What if it addresses some idea or political issue which is not especially important to us, or is rooted in a religious cast of mind we do not have? Even a modern Christian may find it hard to identify with the world-view of a seventeenth century one, for example. Isn't there then the difficulty of an 'emotional gap' between the author and us?

Paradise Lost

Milton's *Paradise Lost* satisfies all these conditions for being difficult. It is extremely long, and does not break down into intense lyrical moments like Thomas's poem. Rather than conveying the deep personal experiences of the author it seems to be conveying no more than his vast erudition - which is impressive, certainly, but not personally engaging. (Though reading and study can, let us remember, also be profound emotional experiences.) And Milton's great themes of sin, atonement and redemption are probably not uppermost in many readers' concerns today. To top it all, the labyrinthine syntax poses yet another obstacle. Can one, then, be moved by Milton? Should we even try to be? What emotional link can there be, after all, between us and this seventeenth century religious epic?

Paradise Lost certainly deals with emotions, but of a different kind to those which we expect from post-Romantic art. Where Thomas is personal, Milton is prophetic. The individual personality of the prophet-poet is of little interest. He is not the spokesman of his own feelings, but the vehicle through which a wisdom greater than his own takes a voice, and by means of which the great cosmic energies of creation and destruction find an artistic form. This wisdom and energy inspires feelings like awe,

terror, humility, wonder and repentance - emotions well beyond the everyday, and closely related to religious experience. The pictures through which they are communicated are suitably otherworldly. Here is a description of part of hell, beyond the river of Lethe:

*Beyond this flood a frozen Continent
Lies dark and wilde, beat with perpetual storms
Of Whirlwind and dire Hail, which on firm land
Thaws not, but gathers heap, and ruin seems
Of ancient pile; all else deep snow and ice,
A gulf profound as that Serbonian bog
Betwixt Damietta and mount Cassius old,
Where Armies whole have sunk: the parching Air
Burns fore, and cold performs th'effects of Fire.
Book II, lines 587-95*

What are the emotions corresponding to this scene? Presumably awe before divine might and its terrible punishments, coupled with a kind of wonderment at the weird and wonderful setting. We are helped to imagine the life-in-death of this icy inferno by the sensual imagery, with its feverish conjunction of hot and cold (enhanced by those shivering 'f' sounds in the last line). Another device is the epic simile. This seems at first to come from the library rather than the heart, but it is worth delving into: the Serbonian bog in Egypt is supposed to have swallowed whole armies. This puts still another terrible picture in our minds, and suggests that Satan's own army can only expect a similarly gruesome fate. The whole scene works quite differently from the communication of a personal experience. It is an expression, visionary and learned, of something outside ourselves, 'out there' in the whirling conflict of cosmic forces which shapes the universe. We might find such a landscape in a film like *The Lord of the Rings*, another epic which lifts us from our world into one where primeval powers do battle. If at first we don't find it relevant to our own experience, then that is the point: next to the story of man's relation to God, the things we usually regard as relevant are base and trivial matters.

Dramatic argument in poetry

Another way in which emotions are presented in verse, especially in earlier centuries, is argument, in the sense of persuasive speech. Like many other poets before the modern period, Milton is writing in an ancient tradition of rhetoric. In this tradition, characters articulate passions not so much by describing them directly, in the modern manner, but through speeches they make on matters thrown up by narrative. In Homer's *Iliad*, the characters do not announce their feelings much, but they show them in their great speeches and deeds. Milton follows the classical epic in this, as in many other things. In these lines from *Paradise Lost*, in which Satan rebukes the fallen angels, there runs a torrent of scorn, pride, and desperate determination. It is meant to make his listeners feel ashamed and defiant, and we can hardly help identifying with them a little as the verbal assault crashes around us:

*Princes, Potentates,
Warriors, the Flow'r of heav'n, once yours, now lost,
If such astonishment as this can seize
Eternal spirits; or have ye chos'n this place*

*After the toil of Battle to repose
Your wearied virtue, for the ease you find
To slumber here, as in the Vales of heav'n?
Or in this abject posture have ye sworn
To adore the Conqueror? who now beholds
Cherub and Seraph rolling in the Flood
With scatter'd Arms and Ensigns, till anon
His swift pursuers from Heav'n Gates discern
Th'advantage, and descending tread us down
Thus drooping, or with linked Thunderbolts
Transfix us to the bottom of this Gulf.
Awake, arise, or be for ever fall'n.
Book I, lines 315-330*

This speech might be compared to Henry V's Crispin's Day speech to the troops before Agincourt. It is dramatic - public oratory, not private confession. It does not invite us to share the author's private experience nor to reflect on our own. Instead it draws us into a world of grand feelings, transporting us from the mundane and the ordinary to the heroic world, in which extreme and violent passions are natural and naturally expressed through language of sublime eloquence. And it is, essentially, an argument, as Satan gives reasons for getting up and fighting on. However strong the feeling, it's also a piece of thinking. In Shakespeare, too, characters think their way through problems, and it is in this thinking, and the pictures in which thoughts are clothed, that they express their passions. In both, we cannot separate mind and heart. Through dramatic argument, thinking and feeling become one.

Dramatic emotions

Language may not be very good at describing emotions, then, but literature can be supremely good at dramatising and depicting them. It does this simply by bringing to the mind, and the mind's eye, things that stir something in us. The words themselves are not important, though their rhythm and music might help. It is what they point to that really does the work, whether it is rusty ploughs or mountains of hail. A poem may be as beautifully simple as 'Tall Nettles', reminding us of a time when an ordinary sight - the corner of an overgrown farmyard - seemed to hold an eternal significance. Or it might be as grandiose as Milton, attempting through majestic scenes to bring us to a sense of the eternal itself. Images can suggest nostalgia and delight, while spoken arguments - language in action - can show what nostalgia and delight actually feel like. We can be moved within ourselves, when we are reminded of something we know, or taken out of ourselves to some new world of feeling. Or we may even be moved from a state of passion to one of serenity and rest. It is interesting that the metaphors we use to describe emotion are very often to do with movement: we say we are uplifted, transported, exalted, depressed. And when reading, it is this sensation of motion which matters. For any movement of the mind - down as well as up - is a welcome reminder that we are, mentally as well as physically, alive.

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