The Value of Sad Poetry

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Consider the first two quatrains of this sonnet by the American poet Edna St Vincent Millay:

> Time does not bring relief; you all have lied
>
> Who told me time would ease me of my pain!
>
> I miss him in the weeping of the rain;
>
> I want him at the shrinking of the tide;
>
> The old snows melt from every mountain-side,
>
> And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane;
>
> But last year's bitter loving must remain
>
> Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide.[1]

Assuming Millay is speaking in her own voice, why should I care about her heartbreak? I never met her personally; she died more than half a century ago; this pain, too, is no more. Assuming she is speaking in the voice of an invented poetic persona, then perhaps I have even less reason to be touched, for this is, in effect, nobody's heartbreak. Yet I wonder if any of you was focusing on Millay herself and

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[1] Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950), 'Time Does Not Bring Relief; You All Have Lied' from *Selected Poems: The Centenary Edition*. Edited with an introduction by Colin Falck (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), p. 13.

looking to get further specifics about *her* heartbreak as you listened, or imagining some fictitious persona and feeling *for her*.

Sometimes we go to poetry: sometimes we go to poetry that is sad. Yet, despite this sadness, we find enjoyment in such engagement. Are we all masochists? Hardly. So, on the assumption that those of us who relish and value sad poems are not suffering from some psychological disorder, we would do well to understand better this very human practice.

Philosophers of art have long discussed the problem of emotional engagement with tragic characters, what today is referred to as the paradox of tragedy. The puzzle, they say, is that, out of their own free will, people go to theaters and cinemas, and open up books, to see other people suffer. Moreover, they enjoy such activities. Indeed, the more moved they are, the more enjoyable they claim the experience to have been, and the better and more valuable they find the work that thus moved them. As David Hume put it, 'It seems an unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle'.[2]

Many attempts have been made to shed some light on this problem and make coherent this apparent inconsistency in our behavior and experience. Some of them take their inspiration from Aristotle and his notion of catharsis, according to which we are relieved of the very emotions aroused by the tragic work by the either cleansing or transformational effect the tragedy has upon those emotions.[3] Others, like Hume, focus on the artistry employed by the tragedian, including not only the skilled use of rhetorical devices but also the manner of presentation of the tragic events and characters. According to Hume, together these not only offer a positive countervailing weight to the negative emotions but, by the power of their effect, absorb those emotions and convert them into something pleasurable.[4] Still others find that the reason for our enjoyment of tragedy is to be found in what it says about us: the fact that we are moved by the plight of others,

[2] David Hume, 1757. 'Of Tragedy.' In *Selected Essays*, ed. S. Copley and A. Edgar, 1993 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 126.

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics*, chapter 5. In *Rhetoric and Poetics*, Trans. W. Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater, introduction by Friedrich Solmsen (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), p. 230. For a review and categorization of the many responses to the paradox of tragedy, see Jerrold Levinson, 'Emotion in Response to Art: A Survey of the Terrain.' In *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. M. Hjort and S. Laver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 20-34.

[4] 'This extraordinary effect proceeds from that very eloquence with which the melancholy scene is represented. The genius required to paint objects in a lively manner, the art employed in collecting all the pathetic circumstances, the judgment displayed in disposing them: the exercise, I say, of these noble talents, together with the force of expression and beauty of oratorial numbers [*rhythms*], diffuse the highest satisfaction on the audience, and excite the most delightful movements. By this means, the uneasiness of the melancholy passions is not only overpowered and effaced by something stronger of an opposite kind, but the whole impulse of those passions is converted into pleasure, and swells the delight which the eloquence raises in us'. Ibid., pp. 128-9.

even if they are fictional, is a sign of our deep 'common humanity' and a reflection of our morality: 'We find ourselves to be the kind of people who respond negatively to villainy, treachery, and injustice'.[5] This recognition promotes a pleasure that compensates for the displeasure we feel for the tragic events themselves.

However successful these and other solutions to the paradox of tragedy are, we must now distinguish that problem from the topic at hand. For the paradox of tragedy is an issue about emotions that are other-directed: that is, emotions that are directed at characters in a story. It is only because these are emotions directed at others that adverting to our moral feelings is a reasonable answer to the paradox. But the lyric poem, it seems, does not invite us to feel about others at all. When we listen to, or, more typically in our now primarily writing culture, read poems such as Millay's, our thoughts and feelings more often wander to some of our own personal experiences, not to those of the writer. So what I would like instead to bring to your attention is the question of why we should seek out, and enjoy, poems about heartbreak such as Millay's, poems about death and dying, poems about loneliness, poems, that is, about the sad experiences that we all, sadly, go through in life—poems, in addition, that direct the painful emotions they promote in us at ourselves. We can call this the problem of negative emotions in lyric poetry, or, more succintly, the paradox of the sad lyric. We can summarize it as follows:

1. The sad lyric, a poem in the first person with a painful subject matter, elicits sad thoughts and emotions.
2. We derive pleasure from (and value) the sad lyric.
3. We do not derive pleasure from sad thoughts and emotions.

I will offer two reasons to explain the problem of negative emotions in the case of lyric poetry. The first is that formal poetic devices (alliteration, rhyme, meter, and so on) are pleasing in themselves, for reasons having to do with our auditory psychology, and, as special aids to cognition, make the process of understanding a poetic message more pleasurable. While the poetic artistry cannot do away with the sadness inherent in a sad poem, it imbues that sadness with aesthetic effect and greater significance. As should be clear from the preceding, this is a Humean-inspired solution, although I will focus more narrowly on poetic schemes and on their cognitive and affective effects. The second reason emerges from the first-person voice of lyric poetry, which promotes a phenomenon I call 'poetic appropriation', where we take a poet's words as if they were our own. If part of the process of coming to recognize, understand, and perhaps overcome painful emotions involves putting our feelings into words, then finding those words in the verse of another provides a readymade vehicle for the expression of our own thoughts and feelings. By virtue of being written in the first person and thereby

[5] Susan Feagin, 1983. 'The Pleasures of Tragedy.' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, pp. 95-104. P. 98.

promoting a personal engagement akin to identification[6] with the thoughts and emotions expressed in the work, sad lyric poetry has a therapeutic value that helps explain the satisfaction we take in it.

Let us see first how the techniques employed by poets can help explain the pleasure we take in sad poetry. Here is another example:

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
>
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
>
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
>
> Because their words had forked no lightning they
>
> Do not go gentle into that good night.
>
> Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
>
> Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
>
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
>
> And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
>
> Do not go gentle into that good night.
>
> Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
>
> Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
>
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> And you, my father, there on the sad height,
>
> Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray,
>
> Do not go gentle into that good night.

[6] I say "akin to" so as to avoid being interpreted as saying that the reader or listener suddenly thinks that she *is* the poet, or that her thoughts and feelings are *exactly like* those expressed in the poem. The notion of identification has a problematic history, to be sure.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.[7]

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas' famous 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night', written for his dying father (and read by the poet himself in this clip), follows the villanelle form: we are rapt in this powerful swirl with only two rhymes: the one involving the 'night' of the first line, and the other involving the 'day' of the second line. Night and day dance about in each stanza, with the middle line always ending in '-ay', and flanked by the other rhyme: in other words, with 'day' always preceded and followed by 'night'. No matter how much 'day' tries to re-emerge in every stanza, the closing lines are final: the 'night' rhyme asserts itself twice, locking it out conclusively.

Notice how I have mentioned nothing yet of the other words in the poem, only the two words at the end of the first two lines in the poem. And yet, by being placed in the beginning of the poem and at the end of those first two lines, we are immediately invited to compare and contrast them—indeed, 'invite' is even too gentle; the poem forces that comparison upon us and keeps it alive throughout by virtue of the rhyming scheme. So here we have sound and sense working together expertly.

The meter of the poem is iambic, but it is not regular. The first line, 'Do not go gentle into that good night', sets the tone by being mostly regular, so regular that indeed it is as gentle as a lullaby; but the third line breaks that regularity in the cry to his father to 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light'. The cry is repeated every other stanza, until it is repeated twice, that is, in the last two stanzas. What does that say? Imagine that Dylan Thomas could instead have used 'Do not go gentle into that good night' as that repeating line (of course, pretend for a moment that that would not have violated the form). The effect of the poem would have been completely different: rather than a forceful and desperate cry to 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light', we would have had a sad and resigned 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. In one case, I see Thomas, by his father's deathbed, shaking him by his arms and crying for him not to die; in the other, I see Thomas holding his father's hand and, looking down and crying in resignation, uttering the second line.

The iambic meter is also the most natural meter in modern English, and the fact that it fits the prosodic nature of the language is, I think, what makes its recitation pleasing to the ear—it is the prosody of everyday language made salient. In everyday speech English speakers already often produce sentences that follow the iamb, without trying or knowing. Perhaps having that made salient by having nearly the entire poem in regular iambs produces a pleasure of recognition—one that we need not be consciously aware of in order to feel—it's like listening to

[7] Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" from *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1957), p. 128. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyWiE1vNSxU

ourselves speak, but better. As Homer put it in his Hymn to Delian Apollo, 'such is their skill in composing the song / that each man might think he himself were speaking'.[8]

So much for the 'sound effects'—although, as I hope to have made evident, sound is never too far from sense. If we now focus on meaning proper, we may note at least two things. One, the wise men, good men, wild men, grave men that Thomas draws his father's attention to. Clearly, the poet is asking his father, and us, to look to these men as models of how to face the inevitable hour, and not to go, or to let ourselves go, without a fight. Perhaps he is also comparing his father to these great men, so that his elegy is also a eulogy. I'll return to this in a moment.

The second meaning feature to note has to do with the many metaphors in this short poem. Most of them are what we may call 'verbal' metaphors: where the word transferred from its typical use to qualify another is not a noun, as in 'Juliet is the sun', but a verb, as in 'old age should burn and rave', 'words fork' 'deeds' dance (brightly, and in a green bay, no less), catching and singing the sun, and blind eyes blazing (like meteors!). We may also note that the deeds are 'frail', the sight is 'blinding', the tears are 'fierce'—let us call these adjectival metaphors. How does old age, something abstract, 'burn and rave'? How can deeds be frail? How can they dance? How can words fork anything, much less lightning? We might not have heard these things referred to in such ways before encountering this poem, and most likely not after, either, and yet, novel and unique as they are, we are able to make at least some sense of them. Of course, it is true that the line between metaphor and literal meaning is not so easily demarcated. Why, for instance, did I not point out to you the lines that mention the day closing or the light dying? Because, these days, days close and light dies out without much of a fuss. What is not happening here is what is happening in the previous metaphors, namely, what Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber call, in their renowned *Relevance Theory: Cognition and Communication*,[9] an expansion of our 'encyclopedic entries' for the concepts involved.

According to Relevance Theory, our minds 'store' concepts in various interconnected ways. Concepts in turn collect information in three ways: lexical, logical, and denotational. A concept's *lexical entry* indicates the word or phrase in natural language corresponding to that concept. The *denotational* or *encyclopedic entry* 'contains information about the extension and/or denotation of the concept: that is, about the objects, events and/or properties which instantiate it'; finally, the concept enters into logical forms, and thus there must be rules governing its behavior within those forms—the *logical entry* contains a set of deductive rules.[10] Speakers share the logical entries attached to a conceptual address and, when

[8] Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Homeric Hymns*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004 [1976]), p. 18, lines 163-4.

[9] Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance Theory: Comunication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
[10] Ibid., p. 86.

speakers share a natural language, the lexical entries as well. The encyclopedic entry, however, is peculiar to an individual, containing all that the individual believes to be the case about that concept. Naturally, encyclopedic entries, while they vary from person to person, must still overlap to an extent sufficient for communication, and may overlap considerably. For instance, we all here share the concept of [COW], but we have different lexical entries for it: *vaca, vache, корова* [karôva], بقرة [bakará], and so on. In Hindi, however, not only do they call it 'gai', they also have a completely different encyclopedic entry for it. While for most of us a cow is a grazing animal we eat, for most of them a cow is a sacred animal they worship.

What happens when someone tells me that frail deeds dance brightly in a green bay is that I am invited to expand my encyclopedic entries for the given concepts. In this case, especially for the concepts of 'deed' and 'dance', by virtue of their being qualified in unusual ways. The same goes for the ways in which we are invited to think of Thomas' father. For most of us, our encyclopedic entries for him are very thin indeed—we did not know his father. So placing him alongside all these men is a way of filling in our entry for him.

Why should expanding our encyclopedic entries for concepts we already possess give us pleasure? I think part of the answer can already be found in Aristotle, who claimed that all men by nature desire to know, and that acquiring new knowledge is something pleasurable in itself. However, I think the *manner* in which we acquire this new knowledge in poetry is something that adds to that pleasure as well. Relevance theory can help us here also. Relevance theory is a reduction of H. P. Grice's several 'conversational maxims' to one: *Be Relevant*. In other words, say no more than what is needed for me to understand you. More importantly, there is, on the part of the hearer, an *assumption* of relevance: I expect the linguistic string I am required to process to result in what Sperber and Wilson call 'contextual effects'—it should *tell* me something. Moreover, as the authors put it, 'The assessment of relevance, like the assessment of productivity, is a matter of balancing output against input: here contextual effects against processing effort'.[11] So, if it is true that speakers seek to make their contributions as relevant as possible, and hearers assume the contextual relevance of what they hear, then when something unusual occurs—say, a word or a sound is repeated—hearers will assume that optimal relevance is still at work. If those repetitions require more processing effort, on this view hearers should tacitly assume that the effort will be repaid with greater contextual effects. This is precisely what poetic techniques produce. Without stating anything explicitly, merely by using words that sound alike (for example), a poet may lead us to consider ways in which the concepts signified by those words relate to one another, or novel ways in which to consider the concepts themselves.[12] Poets, then, follow the economic spirit of relevance theory to its limit, since they convey more with fewer words. The

[11] *Relevance Theory*, p. 125.
[12] Much of the material on relevance theory here is adapted from my 'Relevance Theory and Poetic Effects', *Philosophy and Literature* 36:1, forthcoming 2012.

pleasure here, as in other areas of life, is that of getting more for less: fewer words, by virtue of being combined in novel ways, engender a greater and faster expansion of our 'encyclopedic entries' than more words combined in the usual ways would have. Perhaps this is yet another reason why paraphrasing poems feels so unsatisfactory.

Moving on now to the second aspect of our solution to the problem of sad lyric poetry, how does its being written in the first person affect our engagement with such poems and, specific to our concerns, how does it promote the therapeutic pleasure I claim explains the pleasure we take in them?

As I have argued elsewhere, 'to the first-person expression on the part of the poet or poetic persona there corresponds a counterpart personal engagement on the part of the reader or hearer'.[13] In other words, its being written in the first person automatically places the reader or listener in the position of the speaker; recall the quote from Homer's hymn earlier. That is, we are invited to 'try those words on', in a way, and see if they fit us. Sad poems that speak to our state of mind can thus give voice to our thoughts and feelings, and when they do, we 'appropriate' them as if the were our own—perhaps we underline it in a book; perhaps we copy it out; perhaps we post it on our refrigerators; perhaps we post it on Facebook. We claim it as being expressive of something we feel. As I have tried to describe it:

> When listening to or reading a poem, we begin by hearing someone else's voice, by attending to what the poetic persona might have to share with us. … typically, by the end of the poem we have come to identify with that voice. I do not mean by this that we suddenly come to think that we *are* the poet, or that we are the *writers* of the poem. I mean an identification in the sense that we feel that we *could* have written those words (if only we had the talent to express ourselves as well), because they express something that we, too, feel or have felt, think or have thought, and sometimes even thoughts and feelings we never realized we had but that now, seeing them expressed, we find resonating with something within ourselves. Our experience of lyric poems is therefore peculiarly *personal*: … we are not being told a story, objectively, of what happened to whom and how *they* felt, but instead a very personal account of how *one* felt, in a way that invites us to recognize similar feelings or experiences or thoughts in ourselves.[14]

The question emerges again: if this is how we experience lyric poems, why should it give us any pleasure? I will offer three reasons that, I hope, will shed some light on that question.

The first has to do with the simple fact that the poem gives voice to my feelings and thoughts, which may be hard to express while I am having those feelings and thoughts. This alone can be experienced with a sense of relief; we may say that

[13] In 'Toward a Philosophy of Poetry', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33: 61-77 (2009), p. 69.
[14] Ibid.

the words of the poem take some of that weight that was within me and place it outside—a sensation nicely encapsulated in the idiomatic English expression 'getting it off your chest.' The sad lyric provides a readymade vehicle for my feelings and thoughts, and may, in addition, help me understand them better, by expanding on their significance and drawing connections I was unable to see.

The second has to do with validation of my experience and state of mind. When I encounter a poem that expresses what I feel, I see that I am not just imagining things, or that this is the first time this particular experience happens to anyone, or that I am odd, or my situation sui generis. Finding that others have had the same experience, felt and thought the same things, puts, in a way, a stamp of existential approval upon them. This, I think, is an emotional reward, but also a cognitive one, for it tells me that I was assessing my situation in a way that resonates elsewhere; whether or not it is in fact true, it makes me feel that I am not being unreasonable in thinking and feeling in the way that I do.

Finally, the third reason we can enjoy sad lyric poems is that they can help us feel we belong in this world, because we feel the way others do or have felt, and we can commune with them via their words. Sadness is a state that often makes those feeling it feel alienated from the world: suddenly nothing seems to make sense; suddenly the familiar feels foreign; suddenly the people closest to us seem like strangers who do not understand us and whom we do not understand. The sad lyric can be pleasing precisely because, in helping us dwell in our thoughts and feelings for a while, it helps us recognize them, understand them, accept them. Importantly, it helps us see ourselves in another, and another in ourselves, and in that process we may slowly come back to the world, so to speak, and gradually recover the distance of alienation created by our earlier distress.

I would like to close with one more example, one that I think encapsulates this aspect of poetry particularly well: this is Jorge Luis Borges reciting his '*Arte Poetica*': http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mXFOSBS0qs.

Mirar el río hecho de tiempo y agua
y recordar que el tiempo es otro río,
saber que nos perdemos como el río
y que los rostros pasan como el agua.

Sentir que la vigilia es otro sueño
que sueña no soñar y que la muerte
que teme nuestra carne es esa muerte
de cada noche, que se llama sueño.

Ver en el día o en el año un símbolo
de los días del hombre y de sus años,
convertir el ultraje de los años
en una música, un rumor y un símbolo,

ver en la muerte el sueño, en el
ocaso un triste oro, tal es la poesía
que es inmortal y pobre. La poesía
vuelve como la aurora y el ocaso.

A veces en las tardes una cara
nos mira desde el fondo de un espejo;
el arte debe ser como ese espejo
que nos revela nuestra propia cara.

Cuentan que Ulises, harto de prodigios,
lloró de amor al divisar su Itaca
verde y humilde. El arte es esa Itaca
de verde eternidad, no de prodigios.

También es como el río interminable
que pasa y queda y es cristal de un mismo
Heráclito inconstante, que es el mismo
y es otro, como el río interminable.

Borges says that 'Art should be like that mirror, that reveal to us our own face.' I don't know that art *should* be like a mirror to ourselves, but I think the lyric poem can certainly serve that function and that, when it does so in our most poignant moments, it can reveal to us various facets of what it means to be human.[15]

[15] To look at the river made of time and water
and remember that time is another river,
to know that we lose ourselves like the river
and that faces go by like the water.

To feel that wakefulness is another sleep
that dreams it is not dreaming and that the death
that our flesh fears is that death
every night that is called sleep.

To see in the day or in the year a symbol
of the days of mankind and of his years,
to change the outrage of the years
into a music, a rumor, and a symbol,

To see in death sleep, in sunset
a sad gold, such is the poetry
that is immortal and poor. Poetry
returns like dawn and sunset.

Sometimes in the evening a face
looks at us from the bottom of a mirror;
art should be like that mirror
that reveals to us our own face.

They tell that Ulysses, tired of wonders,
wept with love at the sight of his Ithaca,
green and humble. Art is that Ithaca
of green eternity, not of wonders.

It is also like the river without end
that passes and remains and is the mirror of one same
inconstant Heraclitus, who is the same
and is another, like the river without end.