The Function of Language in the Poetry of Ernest Dowson

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Poets of the 1890s, conscious that they were living in a period of transition, viewed it ambivalently, and were as aware of what the times denied them as they were of what they had gained. Their assertion of freedom from the rhetoric and moral concerns of Victorian poetry is commonly known. Just as important is their sense of being without a deep-rooted poetic tradition which they felt the Victorian order had helped to make possible. Looking back on the 1890s, Richard Le Gallienne said, "The death of Tennyson in 1892 was perhaps the most impressive event of my first years in London. It seemed even more than the death of a great poet, and it touched the imagination as giving dramatic emphasis to the passing of the old Victorian order of which, more than any other, he had been the spiritual and intellectual spokesman." 1 Lionel Johnson, reviewing the major poetry of the nineteenth century, saw it as the work of an inspired imaginative strength, supporting man in a time of spiritual need: "Poetry has been a power these last hundred years; it has both expressed and excited their vague unrest, their despairs and hopes, their lookings backward and their lookings forward . . . the highest poetry of the century, the most intellectual and ideal, has furnished many minds with a kind of religion." It offers, he suggested, an alternative authority for life to that of Darwin and science. 2 Such assurance of their mission was not so forthcoming to Johnson's contemporaries in the '90s - "No artist desires to prove anything," Wilde had announced in the "Preface" to Dorian Gray - and Yeats remembered Johnson and other Rhymers associates as "typical figures of transition, doing as an achievement of learning and of exquisite taste what their predecessors did in careless abundance." 3

But the Victorian predecessors of the transitional '90s were themselves conscious of living in an age of transition and uncertainties, of wandering like Arnold between a dead world and a world unborn. 4 Tennyson showed the artist fluctuating and divided between Shalott and Camelot, the palace of art and the city of men. The "representative poem of the age," as Houghton remarks, is not a poem of "belief or unbelief. It is a poem of doubt." 5 The conflicts of Victorian thought and the divisions between private and public art - aesthetic and social values - persisted into the '90s as a continuous, if changing, stream of transition, and Tennyson's crisis in poems like "The Palace of Art" - or Arnold's dilemma in "A Summer Night" - reappears in the work of Ernest Dowson, the most representative fin-de-siècle poet. Yet Dowson, like Le Gallienne, saw in the death of the laureate the end of the old Victorian order. He wrote an appreciative requiem, "The Passing of Tennyson," in which the old poet, a "prince of song," walks with the "laureled few o'er fields Elysian";
We mourn him not, but sign with Bedivere,
Not perished be the sword he bore so long,
Excalibur, whom none is left to wear—
His magic brand of song.

Dowson's image of Tennyson is not one of a transitional figure like himself, but that of a poet whose achievement stands as an impossible ideal in the '90s. The sense is that a line of succession has been broken; and to know the meaning of the poet's role and the function of his art, Dowson felt that he had to begin at the beginning. In a number of his most representative poems, he questioned and explored the foundations of poetry - the nature of language - and he succeeded in formulating a place for the poet in a divided world.

Dowson's poems are concerned with the question of language, and one of their recurring motifs opposes the futility of words to the efficacy of silence. Often the theme appears as a breakdown of communication between lovers who, like those in "You would have understood me had you waited," are "fated / Always to disagree," and who cannot join in a common speech:

What is the use of speech? Silence were fitter:
Lest we should still be wishing things unsaid.
Though all the words we ever spake were bitter,
Shall if reproach you dead?

Silence is less divisive and risky than language when the deeper emotions are involved, and in "A Valediction," it is more effective:

Words are so weak
When love hath been so strong;
Let silence speak.

"Give over words and sighing," Dowson says in "Venite Descendamus," because "Silence [is] best, with songs and sighings over." The dying leaves "cover / A vain lute," And in the differently charged atmosphere of "Terre Promise," the "speaking silence" of physical touch will let the barrier fall between the lovers with no need for "vain words." Dowson's last offering in "Amor Umbratilis," laid like ointment on "unobservant feet," is the gift of "Silence." He has, he says, "no songs to sing."

The references to a stoppage of art - the lute buried under leaves, the singer made silent - suggest a frustration with language that is considerably more than a conventional gesture of the poetry of unrequited love, a tradition Dowson does use extensively. "Silence is best" because of the inadequacy of language to communicate the self, on an essential level, with other selves. Words do not have the power to transmit fundamental realities. On the other hand, Dowson was also aware of the opposite, and not necessarily contradictory, notion of language as having too much force for the speakers to control, so that only by holding back from words can one keep self-composure and balance in moments of high emotion. The speaker in "O Mors!" asks his lover to "Give over playing, / Cast thy
viol away," not because art is insufficient to the occasion, but because it communicates the sorrow too violently:

Be no word spoken;
Weep nothing; let a pale
Silence, unbroken
Silence prevail!
Prithee, be no word spoken,
Lest I fail!

- in the sense of an utter breakdown. The pinched, tight-lipped economy and suppression of the lines form a perfect vehicle for the theme of the dangerous impact of language. In "Terre Promise," language can bring the lovers into each other's immediate presence - only "half a word would shatter utterly" the barrier between the speaker and his heart's country" - and the speaker turns instead to the less intense and the safer communication of "touch of hand / Or speaking silence." The poem "Seraphita-Seraphitus" invokes an ideal presence, "one form pure and perfect," to manifest herself to the speaker in a supreme visionary moment. The lovers' quest for the beloved is specifically identified, moreover, with the poet's creation of his art. Though the Seraphita is absent somewhere "on the earth," she is created by the poet and put into the words he addresses to her:

And I send these songs out to thee from the shadows,
And I call to thee and cling,
Who are shrined tho' perchance I never find thee,
In whatever song I sing.

He uses the words the lover turned from, in "Terre Promise," to break through the barrier. The ideal which the poet seeks to connect himself to and his attempt through poetry to do so are indistinguishable. It seems we have come to the reversal of the notion that silence is the fitter speech.

The concern with language - the different voices of sound and silence - is part of a larger division in the world of Dowson's poetry, an opposition of symbolic places which represent the human condition as divided into two contrasting states: one which has renounced speech or transcended its need, and another which has not yet attained an effective use of words. The first is a silent home or shelter for the innocent and holy; the second is the encompassing, noisy world. The home of silence encloses the life of inner contemplation and devotion to spiritual ideals transcending time - the convent of the nuns of the perpetual adoration:

Calm, sad, secure; behind high convent walls,
These watch the sacred lamp, these watch and pray;
And it is one with them when evening falls,
And one with them the cold return of day.

The nuns "heed not time," but convert "their nights and days... Into a long returning rosary" - the symbol of their chosen state, and the means by which they transform the temporal phases of
time into the closed circle of prayer. Needing only the touch of the fingers on the beads to be told, the rosary is the wordless language of nuns vowed to silence while they keep perpetual watch on the Blessed Sacrament.

Outside the silent enclosure of the convent, the "wild and passionate" world beats with clamorous, insurgent voice against the wall. There is no contact between the two. Detached from the world and from its compulsion to sensual appetite and surfeit, the nuns attain a purity of vision for which Dowson has a deep respect: "... they have serene insight / Of the illuminating dawn to be." In their contemplation of a Second Coming, they can have nothing to do with the fading roses of the world. But although Dowson puts a high value on the ideal which the nuns manifest, he cannot help speaking from his own, different point of view, which is outside their sanctuary. The roses of the world are "our roses" (my italics). The nuns "put away desire" - the action is negative rather than positive, and not the same as their proving themselves stronger than desire, or integrating desire with their religious vision. In saying that "Mary's sweet Star dispels for them the night, / The proper darkness of humanity," Dowson intimates that darkness is a rightful portion of the human whole, from which the nuns have cut themselves off. Hence, the spiritual wholeness of their lives looks differently from a different perspective, and there is even a certain cruelty involved in the purity of their lives:

   Man's weary laughter and his sick despair
   Entreat at their impenetrable gate:
   They heed no voices in their dream of prayer.

The question raised in the last stanza, "Surely their choice of vigil is the best?" though it is answered, "Yea," suggests in the very asking that the nuns' moral priorities are not self-evident. Dowson succeeds in qualifying - he never intended to subvert - his celebration of the nuns' state. He says enough to make it clear that he is not quite helplessly languishing outside the gates of an impossible ideal.

Nevertheless, the nuns must keep detached from the rest of humanity and, in so far as they can, from certain laws of human nature, to preserve the soul's home of silence. The fragility of innocence did have an obsessive hold on Dowson's imagination, and his children and pure of heart generally suffer the tragedy of having to grow up or are kept pure by death. His poems chart the track of life's destructive laws as inroads of the world upon silence - the marks left by the initiation of innocence into sexuality, and the corruption of spiritual values by materialism.

In "Yvonne of Brittany," for instance, the lovers' apple orchard is a haven from the world for the "first faint flush of love" - a place where silence is expressive and words are "few." A year has already passed, however, and unlike the walled convent, this place of innocence was vulnerable to the conditions of
the world, to the seasons' rotation from spring to fall, and to mortality:

In the still, soft Breton twilight,
We were silent; words were few,
Till your mother came out chiding,
For the grass was bright with dew.

The world enters their lives through the changing nature of their love which, with the developing year, turns into sexual passion. The lovers, who have not isolated themselves from their desires, like the nuns, fall from grace:

In the fullness of midsummer,
When the apple-bloom was shed,
Oh, brave was your surrender,
Though shy the words you said.

The loss of the apple-blossom registers the surrender of innocence, which leads to the use of words. The mother's fears are realized, and Yvonne has caught a deadly chill: "There is dew on your grave grass, Yvonne! / But your feet it shall not wet." Even the memory of innocence is fading. "It is grown too dark to stray" in the orchard, and in the world, Yvonne's lover "shall soon forget" her.

Symbolism of place is more explicitly defined as an opposition between the home of silence and the world in "Benedictio Domini" and "To One in Bedlam." In the first, Dowson contrasts two scenes. The first and last stanzas describe the "sullen noises" of the "sounding street" of the world, while in the middle two stanzas (and threatened at both ends by the world), is couched the silent inner sanctuary of the church. The hushed worshippers pay even less attention than the nuns did to the world's voices beating against their walls, yet church and street are in direct proximity to each other, and for one like Dowson, who is not rapt in the sacrifice of the Mass, there is already an invasion of noise: "The voice of London, inarticulate . . . surges in to meet / The silent blessing of the Immaculate." The order of the stanzas places the silent ceremony within the larger structure of the world, while the value systems of the two and their means of expression remain separate. It is a "strange" silence in the church to one accustomed to the activities of a vast metropolis. But though it is the more encompassing, the world is broken up and lacks the unity of the scene taking place at its center, where only a priest and an altar "Dressed like a bride" suffice to reveal the eternal to the world of passing time. Ominously, however, there is just a "dim" congregation, bowed by an "old spell," to bear witness; and the priest himself is old and tremulous.

The madman in Bedlam, making imaginary "posies" out of straw, represents a more complex and perhaps a more modern type of innocence, in that his sanctuary is not self-sought, but thrust upon him as the sign of his incapacity in the world. Symbolism of place tightens upon paradox. The innocence put behind "sordid
bars" is kept to a "strait, caged universe" - to a place restricted and rigidly defined, but which is yet entire, a universe. Outside, in the less defined area of the world, is a truer limitation, a deprivation of what the unworldly one knows in his silent prison. The contrast produces some of Dowson's most beautiful lines:

O, how his rapt gaze wars
With their stupidity! Know they what dreams divine
Lift his long, laughing reveries like enchaunted wine,
And make his melancholy germane to the stars?"

The prison cell expands in significance until it is of a piece with the cosmos, and the Bedlamite's melancholy pertains, is "germane," to the atmosphere of heaven. Rapt and isolated in "dreams divine," the Bedlamite represents spiritual vision sent into exile, the world's own soul stigmatized and cast off by the world. His flower and symbol is the world's flower of passion etherealized by a chaste, heavenly light: "Better than mortal flowers, / Thy moon-kissed roses seem." Though a familiar image in the '90s, it works with climactic effect here by returning the thought from the last lines of the poem back to the beginning. The moon-kissed rose is Dowson's posy or word (poesy) for the one in Bedlam, who cannot speak for himself. Deprived of the world's sources of beauty as the world is of his dreams, the Bedlamite is without a composite, expressive language, and can produce only the innocent travesty of beauty in the posies of straw.

Other, related poems reinforce Dowson's notion that silence is the preserve of innocence, and that to speak is to move in time or become subject to life's changes in the world. In "Beata Solitudo," Dowson returns to the apple orchard of "Yvonne of Brittany" and this time finds an ideal paradise, safe from any intrusion from the world of noise outside:

The silent valley
That we will find,
Where all the voices
of humankind
Are left behind.

It is a "land of Silence," beyond the reach of any sound or change. "Carthusians" is a companion piece to the "Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration." The monks have left the "world's foolish noise" to stay within "their austere walls," which "no voices penetrate." But though they have come from many lands to join in a common worship and renunciation, the monks remain isolated from each other all well as from the world, erecting within the barrier of the monastery narrower walls of silence between self and self:

A cloistered company, they are companionless,
None knoweth here the secret of his brother's heart;
They are but come together for more loneliness,
Whose bond is solitude and silence all their part.
The inference is that language carries the taint of the world, and that in the quest for individual perfection of the soul, it has to be abandoned with the world and with the human fellowship that language makes possible.

As we've seen, Dowson respects the value system embodied in the cloistered life, while remaining aware of the points of view the cloister excludes. Outside the monastery walls, as he did outside the walls of the convent, he speaks in the first person plural: "We fling up flowers and laugh, we laugh across the wine." The effect is to suggest a fellowship among the revelers at the wine table that is absent from the self-enclosed solitude of the monks' "beatific life." As opposed to the pale imagery which suffices for the portrait of the Carthusians, a "white company" abstracted from the rest of mankind, Dowson draws on a more violent and specific language, symbolistic and syncretic, to describe the life of the world and its complex interdependence of desire and decay: "Our cups are polished skulls round which the roses twine." In the last stanza, this becomes the tense and concentrated metaphor, "our wine is death." But the monks' silent vigil is in its turn a silence "of death" - those who have fled the world and those who revel in it have at least one fundamental bond. Dowson's purpose seems to have been to mediate between their two systems, which cannot communicate to each other directly, through the agency of poems which encompass and express both. Brought together in poetry, they no longer polarize and destroy the possibilities of communication, but suggest Dowson's understanding of the importance of the poet's role.

It is a more encompassing concept than we might expect from a writer who has never established a major reputation. The poet cannot enclose himself within the sheltering walls if he is to interpret those who do. The monks, the nuns, the Bedlamite, the lovers in "Beata Solitudo" - these have security of faith, conviction of their vision, and innocence. They know a sustaining sense of order; their world is small, self-contained, satisfactorily defined: a church, a convent, a cell, an orchard. By limitation and deprivation, they can structure their lives, and though their sanctuary does not exempt them from the common law of time, they retain a sense of timeless values. Having shut themselves off from the rest of mankind and notably from language, their sacred place is always silent - a blessed silence of communion with God, an emotionally charged silence of two lovers alone. The spiritually most important experiences remain the private actions of the soul in retreat, and it is for the poet in the speaking world to render these into a language that will not do them violence. The world itself surges with inarticulate sounds around the impenetrable enclosure; it is in a state of frenzy or riot, without a sustaining faith or vision of a cosmic order that would give meaning to the passing moments of life. In contrast to the home of silence, the world is an open area with no defined boundaries, yet it is as limited as the other. The world has not learned how to address its own holy places, and cannot represent itself in a language which the innocent will heed - or could admit without peril. Dowson's poet is spokesman for the world as well as interpreter of silence.
As the verbal place or structure on which both silence and the world are dependent for words and expression of their existence, the poem reveals the eternal meaning and aspiration of life beyond language, and it articulates the frustration and passion of those whose language is impaired and desperate.

Although the Victorian transition persisted into the 1890s and beyond, there was a change, as Houghton points out, between the prevailing attitude at mid-century and that of the fin-de-siècle. Victorians such as Arnold and Mill tended to think of their uncertainties and doubts as part of a process of mental growth; the transition that they were in, the Victorians felt, would lead to a new order of truth. After 1870, this view became less possible, and as the influence of Pater gained over that of Arnold, the state of transition came to be seen as a more or less permanent condition of modern life. The change is seen even outside the school of Pater in a late Victorian like Hardy, who insisted that his poems and stories were meant to convey only the impressions or "seemings" of the disconnected moments of experience, and not a coherent philosophy or version of absolute truth. And Dowson's, like Hardy's, is a poetry of flux. Perhaps no other writer of the period except Hardy shows so persistently as Dowson an awareness of time's transience and man's nakedness in a world without a permanent structure to contain time as a whole. Dowson's reverence for the eternal verities found in the home of silence does not keep him from feeling that the present moment is all that there is, and pleasure in it is spoiled by the knowledge of its inevitable swift loss, as in "My Lady April":

... is it that she dimly doth foresee
Across her youth the joys grow less and less,
The burden of the days about to be.

"Vitae summa brevis": the spring of life withers in a year. Except for rare poems, in which time brings to innocence more than it takes away ("Growth"), or contributes to the soul-making of "Quid non speremus, Amantes?" Dowson works under the pressure of a universal "Fear . . . the memory / Of what is all men's share" ("Cease smiling, Dear!"). Even the successful utterance in his poems of the different voices of sound and silence does not relieve the anxiety of living in a time in which there is nothing to look forward to.

The most common criticism brought against Dowson, although it does not appear as frequently as it once did, is that he had relatively little to say, and that he was a representative poet of a minor phase of poetry, memorable as the time of Yeats's apprenticeship. He did not succeed to Tennyson and wear the "magic brand" Excalibur for a new age. Rather, having to work without the sense of a tradition or an absolute truth, he expressed the disillusion and rootlessness of what Yeats called "The Tragic Generation";
We have believed the beautiful false stories,
Fed on the faiths that after childhood fail,
Now to our eyes the universe appeareth
A vessel rudderless without a sail.

In fact, so did the universe appear to Tennyson in In Memoriam, before his deeper emotions answered the voice of unbelief with an angry "I have felt." Dowson had so such reservoir to fall back on in the face of a meaningless universe; and the lines from "Awakening," expressive of Victorian uncertainty and transition, also reflect the more modern mood and tensions of an age that was changing without any sense of direction or the ballast of deep-seated beliefs.

NOTES

1 The Romantic '20's (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Page, 1925), p. 115.


4 Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870 (New Haven, Lond: Yale UP, 1957), makes it clear that the sense of living in a time of transition was a widespread Victorian phenomenon. See Ch 1, "Character of the Age," esp pp. 1-4.

5 The Victorian Frame of Mind, p. 22.

6 The Poetry of Ernest Dowson, ed by Desmond Flower (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1970). All subsequent references to Dowson's poems are to this edition, which includes his unpublished work. "The Passing of Tennyson" was not printed until 1915.

7 The division of life into temporal, worldly conditions and an ideal imaginative realm occurs everywhere in the poetry of the '90s, and other critics have noticed its appearance in Dowson. One of the best essays on the subject - and on Dowson's work as a whole - is John Reed, "Bedlamite and Pierrot: Ernest Dowson's Esthetic of Futility," Journal of English Literary History, XXXV (March 1968), 94-113. Reed's argument is different from mine, and contends that Dowson's poetry is one of frustration because it aspires to an ideal state beyond language - or total absorption in what I call the home of silence. I think this neglects an important aspect of Dowson's concept of the function of poetry. Also pertinent to this discussion is Jan B. Gordon, "Poetic Pilgrimage of Dowson," Renascence, XX (Autumn 1967), 3-10, 55.

8 Translating the poem into French for Henry Davray, Dowson explains the first stanza, "I imagine the madman (fou) making imaginary bouquets of roses out of straw which lines his cage." The Letters of Ernest Dowson, ed by Desmond Flower and Henry
Maas (Lond: Cassell, 1967), p. 370. Arthur Symons noted of
"To One in Bedlam": "It is a symbol of the two sides of [Dow-
son's] own life: the side open to the street, and the side
turned away from it, where he could 'hush and bless himself with
silence.'" See "Ernest Dowson," Symons's obituary essay, re-
printed in Writing of the Nineties, from Wilde to Beerbohm, ed

9 Cf John Reed, "Bedlamite and Pierrot": "... art, for
Dowson, is an attempt to incarnate the imperishable Idea through
the medium of the artist's egocistic expression, thereby phen-
omenalizing and destroying it as well" (pp. 111-12).

10 See The Victorian Frame of Mind, pp. 13-17.

11 Hardy took this position a number of times. I refer in my
text to his "Preface" to the first edition of Jude the Obscure,
and his "Preface" to Poems of the Past and the Present.

12 This attitude is typified by Graham Hough, The Last Romantics
(Lond: Gerald Duckworth, 1949), pp. 204-15. Geoffrey Tillotson,
on the other hand, points out that considerable thought must
have gone into Dowson's work: "He succeeds in the use of forms
like the villanelle because he can write lines which are sub-
stantial enough to bear repetition, or to make minute variation
worthwhile." See "Ernest Dowson," Essays in Criticism and Re-