

Robert Beum

Reason And Love: The Epigram

... reason and love keep little company together nowadays.

— *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

1

What is generally believed about epigrams is something like this:

Epigrams belong to "rhetoric," not to poetry.

They are purely ratiocinative, a species of wit.

They are rather superficial, staking nearly their whole claim on the appeal of a mocking or teasing cleverness.

They have the limitations of the negative: their connections with affirmation, with love, are feeble or nonexistent.

They are more ornamental than substantive.

They represent a minor genre, a source of amusement but not of power.

Oversimplifications about other literary genres have been challenged and sent packing. No one has done such service for the epigram.

2

The kind of writing we call epigrammatic, the piece we call an epigram, attains its fullest and most distinctive character in a particular type: the verse epigram. It is a genre in its own right, distinctive, independent, requiring no nonepigrammatic context.

The remarks that follow apply specifically to it but generally to the prose epigram as well.

3

There are several types, and even a cursory attempt at classification is bound to scatter some of the oversimplifications and misapprehen-

sions. Of course classification is intended to be civilizational—to foster fine discrimination—not to encourage the habit of quibbling.

4

Satiric.

But at best this word is only the lesser of other evils in terminology: we have no word that covers the whole range of tones beginning at mildly skeptical questioning, running through satire proper, and ending at harsh mockery and abuse.

In epigrams, as elsewhere, satire ostensibly aims at reform: when we are laughed at we may try to mend our ways. But satiric work can be an end in itself: every good satirist knows that the barbs were fun in the forging, no matter the result.

5

Combative.

Characteristic here is the salient sober thrust more direct than that of satire. The attack is on something—idea, attitude, judgment, sect, trend, invention—that common sense, tradition, or superior insight takes to be defective or dangerous. The combative epigram often takes the form of a reply, a riposte.

6

Apothegmic.

The concentrated distillate of an analysis, as of the passing of an era, or the unfolding social consequences of some innovation in ideas or technics. A critical attitude is usually implied but may be subdued in the prevailing tone of serenity or resignation.

7

Encomiastic.

Here one expects anything from heartfelt praise or admiration to self-serving flattery. When sincere, the encomiastic or complimentary epigram requires not only rational intelligence but kindness, tenderness, or devotion, and may waken these in response. The lines on Milton show us the other Dryden, the generous student of the master.

8

Memorial, commemorative.

Here the motive is to reduce to its essence and thereby make eternal that which in some person, place, or action is considered worthy of

remembrance and loyalty. What is required is the ability to achieve a tone of loving pride.

9

Elegiac.

There is an expressible attitude in which one stands in sober wonder or in a sadness or melancholy untouched by sentimentality. If an epigram develops it will be one that opens to sensibility, to personal feeling. In such lines the clear, precise statement becomes restraint in all its glory, statement revealing such depth or tenderness that one is never far from the sense of great, perhaps barely sustained control.

10

Testamental.

The epigram as credo or summation of experience or attitude. This seems a hybrid of memorial verse and apothegm. It strikes the note of finality. In Landor's famous epigram on his seventy-fifth birthday there is a firm, judicious, succinct summation of experience (or what appears to be, for the truth was somewhat different). In his lines beginning "To my ninth decade I have tottered on" the statement is restricted to a summation of the speaker's attitude toward surrendering this life. The latter epigram has an elegiac strain; as poignant as many a lyric, it demonstrates once more the futility of attempting to be overnice in classification.

11

Droll or humorous.

The impulse is to share one's sprightly good nature or amiable fancy or zaniness. Amiable comedy, humor without bite or shrillness, often turns to the epigram when it feels the need for discipline, for the self-limitation that may help prevent verbosity or sentimentality. There is a way of smiling, without giving offense, in recognition of something that isn't what it might be or used to be. Even comic surrealism has experienced the value of tight form.

12

Epigrams have been excluded from the class poetry on the ground that they are not built around "the concrete," around "images." They are said to be "explanatory," whereas poetry, as distinguished from rhetoric, is "presentative." Modernist poetry is sometimes forgiven for an occasional lapse into metre or even into rhyme, but the epigrammatic is the unspeakable.

Yet language is primarily intellectual and acoustic, not imagistic. Words are better heard than seen: their timbres and cadences are always sounding, even in silent reading; but nothing strikes the retina except the Bodoni. Words are not objects or visual representations of objects meant to engage the eye: they are things heard and understood: first and foremost, sound and symbol. Plenty of work universally recognized as "poetic"—as what Robert Graves calls "Muse poetry"—makes its way with few images or none, certainly with nothing sharply sensory (Yeats, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" or "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing"; Melville, "Greek Architecture"; Bridges, "When First We Met"; Emily Bronte, "Remembrance"). In such verse one sees that even "Muse poetry" is in no way dependent on sensory particulars. Sparkling words and tight packing alone are capable of generating the force and freshness, the aesthetic verbal conspicuousness, that means poetry. The essence of poetry is the use of language in such a way as to create a continuous verbal conspicuousness that pleases the aesthetic imagination.

13

Joseph Conrad argued for the necessity of mystery and suggestiveness in verbal art. In a letter to his friend Richard Curle in 1922 he held that "Explicitness . . . is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion."

Thriving on explicitness, how can the epigram escape condemnation?

Through compactness. Even without "images" or "concreteness" tight-packed verse can have the charm, the mystery, of density.

And through indirection: presenting only the heart of the matter, leaving much to be inferred, the epigram has, at its best, the mystery, the glamour, of suggestive art.

Cosima Wagner—credit is overdue—was the first to recognize that suggestiveness in Nietzsche's epigrammatic style. Her words are memorable. She praises the "brevity with which you felt it necessary to present the deepest and most far-flung problems so that the listener is challenged to a powerful collaboration which is always an interesting position to be in."

14

Even if our classification is only partly adequate it unsettles another long-enshrined untruth: that the epigram is negation, the ready weapon of mind honed for destruction. That epigrams may have some connection with love as easily as with cerebral interests or attack is

most obvious in memorial and encomiastic verse. But love may have a part in shaping even the wickedest epigram.

An epigram or epigrammatic poem that starts in hatred, or even in that smaller thing, spite, will not necessarily finish there. A single serendipity of fresh adjective or metaphor, suggested by an assonance or an association, may prove sufficient to change a spite to an amiable sally.

Writers find out too—sometimes belatedly—that down the years one's creativity is just not sustained by negation, by self-cultivated anger and vindictiveness. Range and productivity thrive on belief and enthusiasms, even on commitment to quite physical delights like Hemingway's.

15

Love makes other connections. Verbal creation proceeds by a series of acts in which one commits oneself, at least for the moment, to particular words and phrases: moment by moment one chooses tentatively from among the innumerable words and associations one finds oneself listening to as possibilities. In this process of linking thoughts to words and words to other words the writer rather quickly finds the ongoing construction itself thoroughly fascinating, if also sometimes difficult. Feelings arise other than those ostensibly or consciously being expressed and may influence, even redirect, what was being expressed. What may leave its mark is delight—joy in creation, in the adventure of meeting the challenges of tone, genre, metrical form. And there, in one of its many guises is—love. Pope's epigrams in verse and Wilde's in prose, no matter what their original and specific motive or inspiration, are among other things an indirection expressing good naturedness and the love of an old and ever fresh tradition, the spirit of bright intellectual play. Wilde's barbs imply, as well, the "decadent's" love of intellectual honesty that pricks the pretensions of hypocrisy and the inflations of self-seriousness and Evangelical lugubriousness.

16

The epigram is a place of meeting and reconciliation: sophisticated attitude and artistry are carried in a form so brief and unornamented as to suggest sometimes the primitive, the archetypal. Down deep in many a sober or earthy epigram pulses the chthonic: notes of chant from the runes of the kobolds, "the drum-taps of Sörgie."

17

The epigram is Classical or Apollonian in the sense that emotional and artistic control are not gifts of the wine god. But homage to Apollo by no means excludes all spiritedness. Warmth, playfulness, adventurousness are acceptable at that altar. The lyrical, even the romantic note may be sounded there, as it often is in encomiastic or elegiac epigrams like many of Landor's or like those in the Greek Anthology. The lyric abundance in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Yeats is made firmer and richer by the habit of modulating into the epigrammatic. Consider what would be lost if one were to excise from the *Canterbury Tales*, the Shakespeare sonnets and plays, and Yeats' octaves, all that smacks of the epigram. The truth, perhaps, is that the epigrammatic spirit, far from necessarily making for what's minor or ornamental, is sometimes one of the main props of greatness in poetry.

Everyone has noticed that there is an actual epigram or epigrammatic couplet at the closes of Shakespeare's sonnets and of most others in the English pattern. It is time to notice that the whole sonnet is very often much like an epigram that has expanded a bit and modulated towards lyricism: in general, the sonnets are at least as epigrammatic as they are lyric. The sonnet—English, Italian, or other—seems to invite, almost to demand, certain qualities of feeling, among them those that often work themselves out as epigrams.

18

Its gender: in life, feminine; in art, masculine.

It is a social genre, and the most instinctively social women are the distinctly feminine ones. Femininity is nurture, generosity, personal refinement, and social cleverness; these are the bases on which civilized sociableness is built. The best epigrams of all are not extant: they were the extemporaneities of the great ladies' salons and were never written down.

But social or personal sparkle is one thing, literary production another. Production is work; drive; toughness; obsession with rational structure; privacy; social privation: the androgynous woman is often a better writer than the eternally feminine one. Cats are adaptable and can be taught but they never bark quite as effortlessly as they mew. The Eternal Feminine may not feel particularly comfortable with that compact strength, the equivalent in words of what maleness feels and cultivates in body and temper: power and restraint in tandem. The verse epigram in particular may be too tight a form for the generosity of the feminine. The least that can be said is that women's poetry has

been notably lacking in the epigrammatic turns so characteristic of the great male poets in the West.

19

Its Soul: not "wit," but compact precision. Cleanliness with a provocative point.

20

Its colour: the halcyon above the grey jargon the modern state calls "communication."

21

Its aristocracy: polish and fine discrimination—the supreme insult to "the famous masses ready for the kill."

22

Its provenance: "Europe," not "America." Lean strength with critical ironic intelligence directed by the Old World's knowledge of creative poverty and earthy spiritual beauty. Crisp words ringing with values: anachronisms, survivals from "Europe," indeed, from the *anciens régimes*.

23

Its discipline: the effort required by intellectual synthesis, supreme condensation, and perfect polish.

24

Its reward: pack the words tight and wonder springs out. Compactness as riches, riches as wonder. "The object of poetry is to enthrall" (Longinus).

25

Its true mode: highly conscious art informed by a virtually unconscious definiteness about values.

26

Suave tones are needed, especially for the satiric epigram. What can supply them? Confidence in values—for writer and audience alike; consensus and tradition. That confidence, or profound empathy with it. Only mellow consensus makes possible an unselfconscious, unecentric trust in values, together with the motive for commending the

models and censuring or mistrusting deviations. Without tradition and convention the epigram seems a mere eccentricity or impertinence. Who am I, that I throw the first dart? But time and order have the prerogative, and as long as they carry weight, even an "I" can give them voice. Whatever an epigram is, its opposite is idiosyncrasy, which is not to say individuality.

27

Confidence in values—or even an empathy with such confidence—is of course what modern intellectuals call arrogance in the writer and complacency, or even stagnation, in the audience. Notably lacking in arrogance was the relativist Pontius Pilate: What is truth? Arrogance or innocence, it is what establishes the meaningful and empowers the sane.

28

There are difficulties other than the extinction of language. In an age where moral and aesthetic relativism established first a tolerance formerly known as indifference and then a tolerance necessitated by the inability to communicate, the only thing that can be found ridiculous is ridicule, e.g., a keen epigram.

Science could do no more than split the atom. Relativism succeeded in splitting the soul.

29

The epigram is a form for those who delight in the charms of the substantive and the definite, in statement made dramatic but not theatrical. Tentativeness may augur well for scientific method but it stirs no blood, fires no imagination. Flatness, plotlessness, and pointlessness have pleased, and can please only a coterie of jaded and alienated demi-savants.

30

Not to recognize the appeal of lusty, even vitriolic arrogance—the arrogance of Pope, Archdeacon Grantly, Coriolanus—is to know nothing about literature or theatre.

31

Without the spirit of play one's visit with the epigram will not be long. That spirit is itself an aspect of tradition: the pre-materialist in human nature. Play as tradition; abstract or lugubrious or hustling social activism as the innovation, modernity.

32

Robert Graves says that “There is still room in modern life for the epigram.”

Room, yes. But words? Is there any evidence to support the theory that the English language is extant?

Even the poets no longer believe in language. They get by on journalism. What used to be called the “simple” or “nature” diction of Wordsworth can be understood today only by diligent graduate students and aging scholars.

33

Democracy brings its insistence on equality even into language. In America those who advocated One Man/One Vote have lived to see One Word/One Syllable.

The discrimination that formerly existed among the vowel sounds has gradually been eliminated in favour of one timbre, the most let down of all—let us grunt our allegiance to the schwa and to the regression for which it stands, one syllable, unpronounceable, under rock.

34

Progress is the path toward “effortless living.” Language makes demands: effortless implies wordless.

35

For every impatience there is an equal and opposite patience. Our impatience with the metaphysical, the contemplative, the tender, and the discriminative means patience for mass-produced and endlessly reproduced blather: the politicians’ sweet nothings, the effluents of committees, analysts, and announcers—words without language.

36

For an age of blather, an alternate word-style: laconic beauty: the epigram.

37

Its relevance to the present time is the relevance of sunshine to fog.

38

Reason and love, science and poetry, together: precision of statement, humanity of vision. The logic of the rainbow.



Poor Robert's Potpourri

1

At a Mental Hospital

That they may live in the city again at ease,
Desperate measures: quiet, grass, and trees.

2

A Creep

This low-life will outlive us: so ill-made
Even the man's infections are low-grade.

3

From the Pulpit

A hot mouth and a cold heart—quite a twist
It takes to make the straight evangelist.

4

Evangelicals

What will these red-eyed loudmouths talking God
Do, in that normal Heaven, to stay odd?

5

Brachycephalic

Like the two ends of logic she can't tie,
Here's one, way over there the other eye.

6

The University

You thrive on sycophants, but kiss the ass
Is kiss of death, though corpses call it class.

7

Ralph Waldo

Emerson says to trust your im-
Pulses. Mine are not to read him.

8

To a Progressivist

You condescend to Nietzsche: he went mad.
But condescending sanity goes bad.

9

A Verlaine

Wring Rhetoric's neck—but if a mask should slip?
What's to protect a poet but his quip?

10

New School

How will they find
In a brash, open place,
The dark beauties,
The private mind?

11

In Brief

Gnomes and soldiers know:
What's not terse
Spreads contagion that kills
Strength and verse.

12

On the Computer Revolution

What no computer tells: what's unknown breeds
And keeps the wonder no computer needs.

13

The Unity

Speak well of hatred, that can estimate
Love's enemies: whoever loves must hate.

14

Homage to Dali

When men shut up for credit cards and cars,
Fish must go walking, talking, toward the stars.

15

Humphry Davy

Chemist and poet—they can live the same
Wonder: say Davy and it has a name.

16

Toward Forty

New beauty, fashioned only by the years:
Under your eyes, delicate line appears.

17

Jane

A father never sober,
A mother never sane;
Father and Mother of time,
Dance with Jane.

18

Egalitarian

There's not a jot of prejudice in me:
I have disliked all races equally.

19

Politic

One ought to make some effort to resist
Temptation; but good manners don't insist.

20

Here Lies Poor Robert

Even his ghost can't get it square
And haunts addresses that aren't there.