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## Poetry of Commitment: John Betjeman's Later Writing

John Betjeman is Poet Laureate, a knight and the most popular living English poet. As such he is firmly entrenched, in his critics' eyes at any rate, as an establishment figure and consequently they are always ready to disparage his writing. They consider it lightweight, even frivolous, and relegate him to the rank of a minor comic poet, the poet of the subaltern, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn and bicycling Oxford schoolgirls. But this view of his poetry is incomplete, partly because it is quite simply out of date, and recently so distinguished a poet as Philip Larkin, writing in *The Guardian*, has dissented from the general critical opinion of Betjeman's poetic achievement: "Almost alone among living poets he is in the best sense a committed writer, whose poems spring from what he really feels about real life, and as a result he brings back to poetry a sense of dramatic urgency it had all but lost." In this essay I wish to discuss briefly what seem to me to be the central features of Betjeman's commitment to life, to suggest a few of the reasons for the growing sense of urgency in his writing, and by considering his poetry of almost the last decade, collected in his latest volume, *A Nip in the Air* (1974), I want also to indicate something of the complexity of his technique. I also hope to answer his critics' main objection to his work, which is still made occasionally against Larkin, that his poetry ignores important issues.

If Larkin is "the John Clare of the building estates", as John Betjeman called him, then Betjeman himself is the Clare of the suburbs. But although he writes from within the essentially middle-class tradition of English liberal humanism, Betjeman has been a consistently subversive force in modern English poetry, and it is clear from his latest poems that his criticism of English society has taken on an angrier tone.

A second element in his writing is the increasingly powerful note of spiritual anguish, a deepening of the religious doubt and despair which was evident in an earlier poem, 'Tregardock', in his volume, *High and Low* (1966):

And I on my volcano edge  
 Exposed to ridicule and  
 hate  
 Still do not dare to leap the  
 ledge  
 And smash to pieces on the  
 slate.

In his later poems it is the urgency of Betjeman's social anger and spiritual anguish which seem to me to characterise his response to life as it really is, but the depth of his personal commitment does not hinder the poetry from exploring some of the fundamental issues of twentieth-century life and expanding into an accurate general statement of the human condition.

In an important sense, his subversive attack on the values of contemporary society is a corollary of his profound reverence for places. Betjeman insistently questions the validity of the notion of progress, in the headlong pursuit of which the modern world heedlessly destroys both the community and the natural environment. In 'Dilton Marsh Halt', for instance, his defence of a small country railway station threatened with closure is not mere sentimental preservationism or debased romanticism. The station is worth preserving, not for economic reasons or even to gratify nostalgia, but because it retains for us in a vital way a close contact with the realities of the natural world, imaged by the red sky and the cedar tree, insistent reminders of our human scale, which we ignore at our peril. The poem mocks our allegiance to the illusory idea of progress, for our linear view of time is merely the creation of human reason, expressing the human ego on a cosmic scale. Time, Betjeman reminds us, is not linear but cyclical, like the life which envelops the little station, and the poem concludes on a wryly prophetic note:

And when all the horrible roads are finally done for,  
 And there's no more petrol left in the world to burn,  
 Here to the Halt from Salisbury and from Bristol  
 Steam trains will return.

The interdependence of time and space and the crucial importance of our retaining a fundamentally human perspective of their relation in our lives is the subject of 'Back from Australia'. The irony of the natural image in the first stanza of the travellers "Cocooned in Time, at this inhuman height" stresses the unnaturalness of the claustrophobic environment, with its neutral-tasting food, plastic cups and the undercurrent of panic which the "everlasting night" produces. Betjeman's savage mockery of this technological miracle and "all the chic accoutrements of flight" is rooted in his profound awareness of how it distorts the human scale and the second, counterpointed stanza makes a full and complete contrast as he stands with relief at home in Cornwall looking up at the night sky. Surrounded by the permanent realities of land, sea and sky in their natural frame, he experiences a sense of space and time expanding again to their proper dimension and real significance. Seen from the human point of view, the "hurrying autumn skies" form a dramatic and vital relation with the land as Bray Hill seems to "hold the moon above the sea-wet sand", while the cosmic interrelation of time and space is emphatically present in the rhythm of the seasons. Betjeman's technique of contrapuntal points of view serves to stress once more the paradoxically dehumanising effect of human progress. In the totally human world of the airplane our attention is dominated by the paraphernalia employed to obliterate time, while in the second stanza the isolated figure standing amidst the huge grandeur of the natural world focusses our vision on the human perspective as "the hills declare/How vast the sky is, looked at from the land" and the poet experiences the liberating sanity of true human scale.

Betjeman's concern for the preservation not merely of fine buildings but the human frame of things which they represent is not reactionary but, ironically, in modern society with its commitment to size, growth and change for their own sakes, economically and politically subversive. As its whimsical title suggests, 'The Newest Bath Guide' satirises "progressive" development. Old Bath, with its chapels, assembly rooms, springs, terraces and sordid backstreets asserted the sheer variety of human life. Modern Bath, however, is symbolised for Betjeman by the stark monolithic structure of its new technical college. Life is now governed, not by a humanistic ethic but by the technological, commercial ethic, and taste now finds expression in "working out

methods of cutting down cost". Because purely human and aesthetic needs are no longer considered significant, proportion and texture are lost in a "uniform nothingness". There is, Betjeman suggests, a fundamentally and powerfully reciprocal relation between people and their environment. The vital humanity and frank sexuality of eighteenth-century Bath have been destroyed by the Puritan work ethic, by the consequent emasculation of its architecture, and the climax of the poem makes a satirical statement of the concomitant, profound loss of human stature:

Now houses are 'units' and people are digits,  
 And Bath has been planned into quarters for midgets.  
 Official designs are aggressively neuter,  
 The Puritan work of an eyeless computer.

Betjeman's criticism of bureaucracy for its blind acquiescence in the debasement of human values is amplified in 'Executive', which also castigates the corruptibility of public officials by private interests. Fundamentally the poem, which records a chance meeting between a young developer and the aging preservationist, makes a savagely accurate attack on a modern idol who is really a modern monster. His role as an executive is little more than a cover for his true career, which is ironically understated as a little "mild developing" of quiet country towns that have "rather run to seed" and which is the source of his wealth and power. The poem's lounge bar monologue conceals a carefully built ironic structure. At first the young man's brash assurance and obsession with status symbols seem harmless and amusing, but this mask is abruptly dropped when his style and the brutal reality it habitually conceals are juxtaposed in the couplet; "A luncheon and a drink or two, a little *savoir faire* —/I fix the Planning Officer, the Town Clerk and the Mayor". This sudden emergence of his covert thuggery reveals him as a profound threat to social order, but his type is perhaps best symbolised in the poem by Betjeman's brilliant parody of his grotesque corruption of language:

You ask me what it is I do. Well actually, you know,  
 I'm partly a liaison man and partly P.R.O.  
 Essentially I integrate the current export drive  
 And basically I'm viable from ten o'clock till five.

This habitual debasement of the language of human intercourse both masks and symbolises his mindless destruction of the traditional, civilised values of order, integrity and humanity, while his childlike love of dangerous toys and his boast of slaughtering pedestrians with his sports car display his fundamentally anarchic and nihilistic impulses. The full irony of his conversation with the elderly poet emerges finally in the facetiously deferential tone of the poem's closing lines:

And if some preservationist attempts to interfere  
 A 'dangerous structure' notice from the Borough Engineer  
 Will settle any buildings that are standing in our way —  
 The modern style, sir, with respect, has really come to stay.

For Betjeman, this young man is the modern hero, embodying the values of his society. And while the new, rootless, uncommitted elements in English society attack its physical and moral fabric, Betjeman feels that one can no longer rely on the traditional, conservative influence of the landed class to assert its civilising power and prop up the tottering structure. In the savagely satirical poem, 'County', he turns his anger on the county set, the "Porkers" as he calls them symbolically. Devoid even of political principles, they have lost their historical sense of social obligation and surrendered to the modern acquisitive culture. Their world now revolves around the domestic trivia of tax-evasion, servants' wages and interminable shopping. Bereft of their social function, they employ traditional rituals to mask the hollowness of their useless lives. But the men's shooting is also a potent symbol of the anarchic, destructive instincts which threaten to pierce the well-bred vacuum, just as the social competition of the dominant women reveals neuroticism and moral fatigue:

Bright in their county gin sets  
 They tug their ropes of pearls  
 And smooth their tailored twin-sets  
 And drop the names of earls.

As the covert parallel in their loud talk of "meets and marriages" implies, neurotic, self-indulgent, bored, this is a predatory society which has turned inwards upon itself. Fundamentally, Betjeman portrays a claustrophobic, nihilistic world, bound by meaningless tradition and not strong enough to resist the insidious corruption of materialism. This stratum of society, affectionately dealt with in Betjeman's early poetry, is now seen as morally as well as physically

flabby. Porker "fat and pampered" is "A *faux-bonhomme* and dull as well,/All pedigree and purse". At the end of the poem Betjeman's residual sympathy for the county set comes as something of a surprise; but this is part of its covert rhetoric of irony:

God save me from the Porkers,  
 The pathos of their lives,  
 The strange example that they set  
 To new-rich farmers' wives  
 Glad to accept their bounty  
 And worship from afar,  
 And think of them as county –  
 County is what they are.

This conclusion is designed to produce a reversal of the reader's normal class response, for in Betjeman's usage "county" has lost its traditional meaning and has become a term of opprobrium; and his sympathy implies nothing less than a damning indictment of the moribund class structure of English society, in which habitual attitudes and moral and social realities no longer reflect each other.

Betjeman's consistent, remorseless probing of the weaknesses of English social institutions includes the church. 'Lenten Thoughts of a High Anglican' is a quietly whimsical poem, which on closer reading turns out to be subtly and powerfully subversive. Fundamentally it challenges not only the church's doctrines but the whole relevance of institutionalised religion. The poem describes his religious response to a beautiful woman worshipping at his church. He calls his madonna "the Mistress" because she looks better cared-for than many legal wives, and she receives from him an appropriately sexual adoration as he dwells lovingly on her eyes, lips, amused smile, expensive but nonchalant elegance and bell-toned voice. However, the poem is a carefully conceived structural irony, and his celebration of the human in a religious setting leads directly to the poem's central statement in the pivotal fourth stanza:

How elegantly she swings along  
 In the vapoury incense veil;  
 The angel choir must pause in song  
 When she kneels at the altar rail.

This paradox, that the divine must also worship the human, which involves a daring reversal of perspective, counterpoints the parson's pious warning that staring around in church hinders our search for the "Unknown God". Like Blake, in 'The Divine Image', Betjeman recognises that every man and woman is a perfectly unique centre of

religious experience, and this stands in contrast to the church's traditional teaching of Pauline theology. Betjeman suggests that we learn the world's spiritual frame by knowing its Creator in another and in oneself, and he does so with a wry yet emphatically satirical apology to institutionalised religion:

But I hope the preacher will not think  
It unorthodox and odd  
If I add that I glimpse in 'the Mistress'  
A hint of the Unknown God.

Like Blake's child in 'A Little Boy Lost', the poet's wise innocence and imagination quietly confound bureaucratically guarded knowledge, with its emphasis on mystery, the arduous search for God, the centrality of church ritual and the discipline of the instincts symbolised by Lent. For Betjeman the church provides quite inadvertently the context for worship of an instinctive and spontaneous kind. His God frankly embraces femininity, sexuality and emancipated modernity, and there is a subdued zest in his kicking over theological and ecclesiastical traces in order to illuminate a spiritual truth.

Most of his later poems which deal with religious themes are governed by his deepening horror at the facts of life and death, by a sense of doubt and loss. 'Aldershot Crematorium' is a truthful and compelling response to the modern way of death. Sandwiched between the swimming-pool and the cricket-ground, the crematorium creates a dominant image of the casual interpenetration of life and death, but this is only fully experienced in the shock of seeing the smoke from the furnace chimney:

And little puffs of smoke without a sound  
Show what we loved dissolving in the skies,  
Dear hands and feet and laughter-lighted face  
And silk that hinted at the body's grace.

This brutal juxtaposition of the vital solidity of the flesh with the air into which it dissolves enforces our true reverence for the human body, particularly because our sense of another's identity depends so much on purely physical attributes. More importantly, perhaps, the hideous incongruity of the transformation, like a grotesque conjuring trick, denies death its proper human dimension and baffles our natural responses.

The crematorium, tastefully hidden in the suburbs, hygienic and efficient, also represents modern society's peculiar treatment of death. It is an obscenity. But although death can be ignored, it will not go away, and the long, straight crematorium driveway creates a forbidding image of its inescapable claims. This paradox is humanised as the mourners talk anxiously about the weather and the living (" 'Well, anyhow, it's not so cold today' "), but the undercurrent of macabre irony lurking in this mundane phrase only pierces their thin facade and reinforces by grim contrast their underlying thoughts of the furnace. Betjeman thus makes the whole situation of the poem focus our attention on its central paradox. Cremation emphasises so insistently the incontrovertible reality of a merely material universe that simple but profoundly human questions about the nature of resurrection and the possible form of a new spiritual identity become, for the modern sceptical age, irrelevant. Modern man seeks to escape his fear in the temporary oblivion which materialism affords, but for a believer, like Betjeman, death presents a constant challenge to his own sense of spiritual identity: "*I am the Resurrection and the Life*':/Strong, deep and painful, doubt inserts the knife."

Betjeman's anguish at being trapped in the vacuum between faith and doubt proceeds from an often appalling sense of cosmic isolation. In 'Loneliness' he explores the personal paradox of his simultaneous belief and unbelief. In tone and feeling he frequently recalls Matthew Arnold, in 'Dover Beach' for instance, but his confrontation with his personal hell of doubt and despair is more dramatic and urgent. The poem proceeds on two levels in a vain attempt to relate the natural and metaphysical worlds, symbolised by nature and the Easter bells; but the poem's organising symbol is an infinitely expanding and contracting universe, which bewilders and terrifies the poet and which gives the poem its emotional tautness. The Easter bells, with their message of assurance, open for him huge vistas of spiritual joy ("To deeps beyond the deepest reach/The Easter bells enlarge the sky"), but this is at once qualified by the poet's scepticism ("O ordered metal clatter-clang!/Is yours the song the angels sang?"), and the universe immediately shrinks to the compass of his own timid, shivering ego: "Belief! Belief! And unbelief .../And, though you tell me I shall die,/You say not how or when or why."

In the second, contrapuntal stanza, Betjeman seeks refuge in nature, but finds there only further cruel paradoxes. He extends the bitter

image of himself as the last year's leaves on the beech waiting to be pushed aside by new growth, for the springtime regeneration of the natural world reminds him of the certainty of his own decay and death. Ironically, the only new growth possible for him will itself hasten dissolution: "For, sure as blackthorn bursts to snow,/Cancer in some of us will grow". This cruel image underlines the paradox that, although part of the natural world, the poet is cut off from its cycles of death and rebirth. Like the bells, nature is impassive to his suffering, nor can a materialistic society offer any consolation: "Indifferent the finches sing,/Unheeding roll the lorries past." For the total sceptic the "tasteful crematorium door" can shut out temporarily the roar of the furnace, but for Betjeman the bells repeatedly speak of his death, yet also hold the painful echo of an irretrievably lost faith. In the last stanza the sound of the Easter bells infinitely extends a universe which is now appallingly deserted and which strikes answering hollow depths in his own being: "But church-bells open on the blast/Our loneliness, so long and vast." The season of natural and spiritual renewal only deepens the irony of his terrifying isolation. The bells represent for Betjeman what the Dover sea did for Arnold, but unlike Arnold he can find no consolation either in human love or in the natural universe.

These later poems of Betjeman are important because they deal with large issues, although they are often located in the local and familiar, and like Arnold's, Betjeman's personal crises expand into a poignant general statement of the human condition. The poem 'On Leaving Wantage 1972' explicitly records such a crisis, which is employed to explore the complex relations between place, time, faith and identity. Betjeman's leaving Wantage with his wife after twenty years raises the issue of the nature of human identity in an acute form. The poem opens with a lyrical evocation, rich in colour and movement, of the centrality of place in human life:

I like the way these old brick garden walls  
 Unevenly run down to Letcombe Brook.  
 I like the mist of green about the elms  
 In earliest leaf-time. More intensely green  
 The duck-weed undulates; a mud-grey trout  
 Hovers and darts away at my approach.

But essentially it is an imagistic poem, developing its metaphysic from the conjunction of disparate and concretely realised images, which force the reader to adopt an altered point of view. By the conclusion of

the poem the little brook has grown into an Arnoldian symbol, not of place but of time, while the church bells which unite the vale as a physical, social and spiritual entity, come to symbolise, not Wantage, but the eternal miracle of the Christian faith which transcends time. Thus, while the poem is apparently about a particular place and the poet's clinging to the things he loved there for reassurance of his identity, "Friends, footpaths, hedges, house and animals", its true subject is time, for time is contained in place and humanised by it. Betjeman examines the ways, trivial and magnificent, in which time is manifested in place. There is the tedious succession of days, of which he is reminded by the faint reek of last night's fish and chips, the weekly newspapers emphasising our linear view of time, the rhythms of the seasons and of the Christian calendar, and beyond that stretches the whole history of Christianity and the timelessness of its faith, which is amplified into a grand statement as the bells' "great waves of medieval sound"

ripple over roofs to fields and farms  
So that 'the fellowship of Christ's religion'  
Is roused to breakfast, church or sleep again.

The central paradox of the poem is that place contains all time, while here time also contains and unites place.

Betjeman's clinging to a particular place where time has been contained and ordered, where this peculiar synthesis has in a real sense created and sustained human identity, is an attempt to find a temporary refuge from time manifested outside place which, for the sceptic, becomes an impersonal abstraction and a force of dissolution. The poet feels that time in this form is the enemy of human significance and therefore that leaving Wantage is a symbolic act foreshadowing death as they are whirled away "Till, borne along like twigs and bits of straw,/We sink below the sliding stream of time." A further irony is concealed in the time frame of the poem, which is given as the third Sunday after Easter. Equidistant between the Resurrection and Pentecost, it reminds him of his own suspension between hope and faith, of his inability to achieve the bells' promised transcendence of place and time, and the poem ends with an honest, painful statement of confusion and loss.

Behind the covert horror of so much of Betjeman's later writing there also lies a hard-won equilibrium of temper. It is this Augustan

sense of balance between private and public, imagination and reason, commitment and detachment, sympathy and irony, which marks the fundamental sanity of his poetry. This balance controls the tone and form of 'Hearts Together', which describes an occasion in Betjeman's youth, the solitary encounter of two adolescent lovers on a Dorset beach. Its situation, its theme — the human capacity for self-deception and the power of time to correct this distortion of values — and the colour and rhythm of the opening lines ("How emerald the chalky depths/Below the Dancing Ledge!") are Hardy-esque, but the development of the poem is quintessentially Betjeman.

The lovers' sexual encounter occurs after a swim during which they pull up jelly-fishes and thoughtlessly leave them to die on a hedge in the hot sun, thus creating by an act of gratuitous cruelty, their own appropriate sexual symbol:

And lucky was the jelly-fish  
 That melted in the sun  
 And poured its vitals on the turf  
 In self-effacing fun,  
 Like us who in each others' arms  
 Were seed and soul in one.

As Betjeman's heavy irony stresses, they create the universe in the reflex of their own egos and the ensuing meeting of their intellects is also incongruously and comically out of touch with reality:

O rational the happy bathe  
 An hour before our tea,  
 When you were swimming breast-stroke, all  
 Along the rocking sea  
 And, in between the waves, explain'd  
 The Universe to me.

Here the familiar Betjeman counterpoint is apparent in the two distinct tones of voice which he employs, the youthful voice of innocence, carrying the rhetoric of sympathy, and the mature voice of experience, enforcing the perspective of irony. These simultaneously held perspectives of involvement and detachment, of sympathy and judgment, create a complex effect in the reader, particularly in the final stanza:

We gazed into the pebble beach  
 And so discussed the arts,  
 O logical and happy we  
 Emancipated hearts.

Their self-consciously modern equation of rationality and happiness is simply ironic because it conceals from them the supremacy of the purely physical in their relationship, while their youthful arrogance in explaining the universe is made ludicrously ironic by the worlds of beauty and mystery by which they are surrounded and which they ignore or casually destroy. Thus the poem's most significant irony lies in the parallel which Betjeman makes between the jelly-fish's "self-effacing" physical death in the sun and their own moral oblivion as they lie scorched on the beach imprisoned in narrow egoism. For Betjeman a moral universe which embraces the arts but cannot include nature reveals a profound ignorance of the importance of true human scale and, from the point of view of the poet's maturity, an ignorance of the power of time to alter moments which seem eternally significant. So by the end of the poem the full irony of its title emerges. What he has recollected is not, as he once thought, a union of emancipated hearts, but a casual conjunction of youthful bodies and minds bound together by self-indulgence, naivete, cruelty and egoism. True emancipation, the poem suggests, lies in the lovers' mature ability in the present to place the illusions of the past in their proper temporal frame. However, the severity of this judgment is tempered by the affectionate, mocking tone which conveys the poet's sympathy for his youthful self and his realisation that his past is only part of a universal experience.

In Betjeman's poetry his commitment to life as it really is is balanced by his insistence on the need to maintain a comic stance towards it, and in this he is, I think, closer to the Augustans than to the Victorians or the moderns. In his early poetry comedy was a form of social celebration, but in his later writing it has also become both an instrument for satire and for personal defence against the horrors of age and death. In 'The Last Laugh', which has a splendidly Yeatsian economy and objectivity, Betjeman's final plea is not for joy, or assurance, or even consolation, but for laughter:

I made hay while the sun shone.  
My work sold.  
Now, if the harvest is over  
And the world cold,  
Give me the bonus of laughter  
As I lose hold.

The humanising quality of comedy allows Betjeman to transcend the anger and anguish of life, and his choice of laughter to help him towards death testifies to his profound belief in the importance of human scale and human values. It is this fundamental commitment to life as it really is that makes Betjeman a truly significant poet.