His Untimely Going

by **Theodore Dalrymple** (October 2018)

Trumna chlopska, Aleksander Gierymski, 1894-95

From time to time people who are unknown to me are good enough to send me their books, often unpublished. Sometimes they contain a strange or mad new theory of Everything, a theory that is intended to reform the whole of human knowledge and put it at last, after two and a half millennia, on a sound metaphysical basis.

More often I receive poetry, and this varies from the

atrocious to the very good. I once read somewhere—I should have kept the reference—that 75 per cent of people have written poetry at some time in their lives. This was quite a number of years ago and since then the written word has declined in prestige; the percentage may therefore have declined somewhat in the meantime. But poetry is still an important mode of expression for many of those who suffer: which is to say the whole of mankind. It would be surprising if all good poetry that had ever been written had also been published.

Recently Mr Edward Greenwood sent me his little unpublished book of poems, *Unfrozen Leaves*, with a preliminary explanatory note to the effect that the various publications to which he has sent them had turned them down, perhaps (so he thought) because they were too accessible and their meaning too clear.

There exists, of course, the kind of person who thinks that any poem more complex or difficult to interpret than birthday card doggerel is too pretentious to be bothered with. However, it was unlikely that Mr Greenwood was of this militantly philistine school, since he had been a university lecturer in English, had published a book on Tolstoy, and was still, at the age of nearly 85, an honorary research fellow in English at the University of Kent. This fact alone should be an inspiration to those of us near enough to old age to think of it as something more than a vague possibility, or as a state brought on by some personal failing.

There is an equal and opposite tendency to the philistinism I have mentioned, namely a snobbery about the accessible, as if the accessible were necessarily trivial because it required no intermediary to explain it. Perhaps, I thought, Mr Greenwood

had truly been a victim of that snobbery. Poetry, after all, is not a medium for original thought, or not often. Alexander Pope, in his astonishing youthful *tour de force* of natural genius, *An Essay on Criticism*, got it right:

> True wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
>
> What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.

Neither Gray's *Elegy* nor Housman's *Shropshire Lad* offer a single difficult or original thought, but both are—at least to me—intensely moving.

I noticed straight away that among the dedicatees of Mr Greenwood's little volume was his late son, Edward, and this caused me a sharp pang of sorrow even before I had read any of the poems. In these days of almost universal survival of infancy, the death of a child before that of his parents seems a particularly cruel anomaly, an injustice, a vile trick of fate. And indeed, without in any way wishing to detract from the other poems in his book, it was the poems touching his son's death by suicide in 2005 at the age of 39 that most affected me in *Unfrozen Leaves*.

No doubt this was in part, as a former psychiatrist, a manifestation of my *déformation professionelle*. In my career I must have examined upwards of ten thousand would-be suicides of varying degrees of determination to die. Some were snatched from the jaws of death by doctors though death was the cynosure of their lives and a few died though they had no real intention to do so. Some I had to examine retrospectively, as it were, after their deaths, by means of a reconstruction from

their notes and other evidence. Camus, echoing Hamlet, said that the only real question was that of suicide, but while I would not go quite so far as this, yet it is an important question. Few of us, I imagine, have never wondered whether we might not be better to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, end them. I know that I certainly have, and yet mine has been, on the whole, a happy life.

But I have witnessed an immense quantity of human suffering. Much of it I have been impotent to alleviate and I have come to the conclusion that it is a shallow view that to such suffering there must always be a technical solution, as if it were some kind of minor infection to be treated and cured by a course of antibiotics. Mr Greenwood’s poems confirm my view and yet—curious paradox—they are more consolatory than depressing. One of the functions, or at least effects, of art is to reconcile us to the inevitability of suffering and, by acceptance, make it somewhat the more bearable without facile denial of its depth. Breughel’s *Triumph of Death*, terrifying on the face of it, that one might take almost as a prefiguration of the Holocaust, has, at least on me, a reconciliatory effect. Perhaps it is that a heightened awareness of the universality of an inescapable destiny that induces a necessary and soothing fatalism.

I have not lost a son, but loss and grief come to us all, at least to all of us for whom

> ’Tis better to have loved and lost
>
> Than never to have loved at all . . .

And this must surely be the great majority of us.

From Mr Greenwood’s poems we learn that his son threw himself to his death over a cliff after much suffering the cause of which no one was able to discover. The grief, the guilt, the longing, the remembrance, are all in his father’s poems. He recalls, in a poem called *Sir Walter Never Lets Me Down*, his son’s fondness for this now neglected author:

> ‘Sir Walter never lets me down,’ you said,
>
> And there the rows of volumes stood that gave
>
> Some respite from the torment in your head . . .

The poet remembers his son’s pleasure in the novels, but:

> No book could give your suffering lasting close,
>
> That death alone could end your life of pain.
>
> Small solace then to see those silent rows
>
> Of books, and hear your praise of Scott again.

The deep, unassuageable longing after his death is simply and movingly expressed, without rhetoric or histrionics:

> There is a tree which overhangs the garden.
>
> The morning comes and we are waiting yet.

The morning comes back with its morning light.

The morning comes, and with its light, the world.

The world comes back, and, with the world, its tasks.

But there’s an absence I cannot forget.

Then the evening falls. He is with his wife still:

There is a tree which overhangs the garden,

But we are still denied our son’s embrace,

A gift whose loss transcends all power to measure.

I look in longing at the garden gate:

He’ll come no more, however long we wait.

Mr Greenwood speaks of ghosts in whose existence—real existence, that is—he does not believe:

In spite of that, imagined, they come near,

Drawn by strong ties that bind,

Our minds pulled back to what they held so dear,

Make what they find.

A silent mouth can seem to speak again,

An arm embrace.

If only love could make that voice remain

And touch that face.

Does this not speak to anyone who has loved and lost, and who would give anything for a moment's real rather than merely imagined contact? When I was young and callow, I used to laugh as spiritualists; but though I still think them mistaken, I laugh no more at them.

The suffering is raw enough, but Mr Greenwood asks whether there was anything worthwhile to extract from it:

What did your untimely going give?

It gave a measure

By which I may weigh

That by which we live.

Then comes a surprising admission, worthy of La Rochefoucauld:

In grief lies secret joy,

Finding in grief a strange pleasure.

I felt it even as a boy:

My brother's death in war brought dangerous pride,

As if I had been singled out to share

A treasure that I should not hide.

Death, he says, is life’s measure; one must avoid alike the propensity to bear with equanimity the death of others and that of turning it into a reason for suicide. All the same:

Our memories perpetually renew,

For though one is not grieving all the time,

True grief is always latent there.

So, intermittently, as days unfold,

Dark meditation, like recurring rhyme,

Will suddenly take hold

With sorrow’s piercing unrest,

And speak what is life’s shibboleth,

The grave expression: ‘Death’.

It is death, indeed, that confers meaning on life which, if eternal, would drag horribly, like an intended article, promised but without a deadline specified. Death helps us sift the important from the trivial:

It is as though Death had bestowed a crown,

A wreath to decorate the mourner’s head,

Woven from wisdom that can weigh the dead

Against the living.

Mourning, we distinguish the ephemeral from the lasting, the meritorious from the meretricious:

Death makes the mourner the assayer,

Impartial, unforgiving,

Whose touchstone tests the good and bad,

The piercing surveyor

Of all the meanness and the vanity

In this our world where worthlessness is praised,

Wisdom discovered in inanity

And music in the musicless.

Perhaps it is my age, the consequence of an almost biological process, but that is a concise description of a world that I recognise.

Very unexpectedly, there is a moving poetic tribute to an undertaker’s assistant, I dare say the only one in English poetry. To be an undertaker’s assistant is not a prestigious employment and one would not expect him or her to be highly educated; but tact and decency are often inborn, and not infrequently eroded by pride in formal knowledge or training. Mr Greenwood expresses both admiration and gratitude.

Each day you sound the sympathetic note,

And help them fill the forms while they shed tears.

It mustn’t seem you’ve got it all by rote

Although you’ve now been doing it for years.

The Greenwoods must have been distracted slightly from their grief by the very goodness of the assistant, for:

We asked you why you ever took the job.

One day, you said, when you too had just lost

A loved one, you were forced to stand and sob

In front of an assistant cold as frost.

And then and there decided you would take

Work with a funeral firm and bend your mind

And energies, as best you could, to make

A cruel hour somewhat less unkind.

We could not but be touched by such a tale,

And by your constant effort to defeat

The power of repetition to make stale

What your position forced you to repeat . . .

The assistant had put her own experience to good use:

> Business and grief are hard to harmonise,
>
> And yet from that past hurt you learned to know
>
> How to bring comfort when the tears rise
>
> And temper sorrow when they start to flow.

Mr Greenwood's poems are gently subversive of much modern psychology. *His* psychology is that of an older and better tradition, the genuine self-reflection and self-examination of Dr Johnson (whom he cites at the head of one of his poems) rather than dishonest elaborations that take their inspiration from Freud. His son was treated in a psychiatric hospital before he committed suicide:

> Psychologists in sessions would explore
>
> Your past experience, certain they would find
>
> Something you couldn't remember any more:
>
> What death, what grief, what family secret lurked
>
> In the subconscious to disturb your mind?
>
> In spite of all their probing, nothing worked.

The certainty of the psychologists was an article of faith with them, unshakable by mere disaster. Therefore, they searched for that buried treasure whose discovery they believed would bring automatic relief.

Mr Greenwood’s father survived the First World War in which he served. He did not speak of his experiences, but the young Edward, during the second war, was inquisitive:

> Such questioning might make you once more lose
>
> The peace that time had brought, to some dread sight
>
> Of fear, of fatal wounds, of dying men.
>
> You would not want such memories again,
>
> As calmly you took in a new war’s news
>
> And folded up the paper neat and tight.

There are thoughts that lie too deep for tears, and even too deep for psychotherapy lasting many years.

Theodore Dalrymple’s latest book is @NERIconoclast