Kinds of Seriousness in Poems by Ben Jonson and Jon Silkin

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BEN Jonson's poem "On my First Sonne" leaves the feeling that something has been achieved, without this allowing any room for complacency; Jon Silkin's "Death of a Son (Who died in a mental hospital aged one)" convinces its reader that we live in a world in which there is no room for complacency, but leaves me doubtful about what the poem has achieved in the face of this. Two poems so widely separated in personal and cultural situation may be expected, no doubt, to be differently experienced by the reader, and I do not offer as in any way surprising the conclusion that Jonson's is the better poem. But comparative discussion of the two poems is suggested by their subject-matter — a sense of loss is in different ways the subject of each poem — and I think that some analysis of Jonson's provides bearings which help one to talk about what is happening in a modern poem such as Silkin's as well as raising questions about the attitudes which inform it. It is my experience, too, that students sometimes feel Silkin's poem possesses an immediacy and seriousness which is somehow "relevant", while Jonson's is "academic" — how can Jonson's strictly imposed form *express emotion,* can this sort of lyric utterance be compatible with a serious treatment of painful experience? That may be a little caricatured, and countering that approach involves a certain amount of routine exegesis, but seeing the two poems together, while I do not claim a special representativeness for either, helps locate an interesting tendency among some modern poets to present suffering as a sufficient and authentic state, a sort of end in itself — something which Ben Jonson's education, emotional discretion, and the moral world he inhabited, would never have permitted him. Is Silkin's kind of seriousness, by comparison, limiting?

On my First Sonne
Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sinne was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy,
Seven yeeres tho'wert lent to me, and I thee pay.
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O, could I loose all father, now. For why
Will man lament the state he should envie?
To have so soone scap'd worlds, and fleshes rage,
And, if no other miserie, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lye
BEN. JONSON his best piece of *poetrie*.
For whose sake, hence-forth, all his vowes be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.

It is true that the imposed form involves Ben Jonson going to considerable lengths to maintain the regularity of his rhyming couplet and decasyllabic line. Some violence is done to both lexis and grammar, but the resulting effect is a curiously simultaneous one of constraint *and* wilfulness; and stress, within the iambic structure, is almost *obtrusively* varied — "right hand," "too much hope," "just day," seem to need even stressing, and the first foot of the fifth line is inverted. The compression reflects the effort at self-control to which we feel the whole poem witnesses; while the elisions of 1.3 combine with inversions of word-order, throwing "Seven yeeres" into a sort of rueful prominence, and forcing us to attend to "thee" as a direct and not an indirect object, to intensify the idea contained in "lent" and the impression of intimate relationship (note the interchanging "thou" and "me", "I" and "thee"). A striking grammatical thrift is exercised throughout the poem; each grammatical item is made to fully earn its presence, and when we come to ll.7-8 we find a kind of double syllepsis in which "rage" is qualified by two adjectives to represent two separate (if allied) states and in which "scrap'd" has three objects. On the other hand, l.10 has been stretched to fill ten syllables by the use of the now archaic possessive and by allowing "poetrie" the value of three syllables. This does not undermine the effect of compression because the line contains an ultimate statement of love for the child, and requires some special kind of emphasis against which the witty paradox of the final couplet, with its grammatical shorthand, can establish its effect. A tight epigrammatic plainness, a deliberate curbing of showy effect,

marks the whole poem, in a way which is at once compatible with a classical sense of decorum yet also suggests the poet's personal sense of the seriousness of his subject.

Jonson attempts to achieve resignation within the framework of a tradition of stoical consolatory literature. The ataraxia (cultivation of stoical indifference) which is an element of this poem was a recognised literary mode — a famous example is the Duke's "Be absolute for death" speech in *Measure for Measure* (III.i.). The poet's attempt to convince himself that his son was only a loan, to be repaid to God on the due date, is a conventional idea used by Jonson in other poems; that it is better for his son to have gone to Heaven to escape the sufferings of the world and the flesh is a traditional, doctrinally-authorised notion. That the memory of his son ("for whose sake" (l.11), though there is a slightly puzzling ambiguity in "whose" — is it for the son's or for Ben Jonson's sake?) must teach the poet in future to discipline himself not to become too attached to the objects of his love is an adaptation, as Herford and Simpson note[1], of Martial's line, *quidquid ames, cupias non placuisse nimis,* "desire that what you love has not pleased too much," wittily modified by the English distinction between "love" and "like". Each stage of the argument, we see, is grounded in some traditional authority; Jonson is drawing upon the accepted standards of his civilisation for succour in his personal loss. The asserted position is one he can confidently put forward for public approval and emulation. The formal structuring and unprivate tone, together with the traditional consolatory statements, set this poem in the public realm in a way that much modern poetry, including Jon Silkin's poem, is not. But it isn't academic, not *simply* a formal epitaph; the metaphor of the loan, the glance at the graveyard in which the mourned child lies, and the way in which the almost wilful liveliness of the speech together with the concrete force of such phrases as "loose all father" and "fleshes rage" counterpoint the classical restraint, are characteristic of the peculiar blend in all Jonson's art of learned tradition with popular and everyday elements. An impression of intensely living individuality always accompanies the public voice. The classical plain style used by Jonson in any case avoids

complete formality; as Wesley Trimpi suggests,[2] it allows a certain intimacy between reader and writer which here is crucially involved in the poem's emotional impact.

The asserted position is that which the poet feels he *ought* to adopt and even *wants* to adopt, but that he should speak of having loved his son as a "sinne" is, in effect, a confession that he is in torment, he feels he is being punished. "Thou child of my right hand," involving the fact that the child is named after the poet himself (see *Genesis* xxxv, 18), conveys the impression of something specially valued, and hence the need of special consolation for its loss. The syntactical arrangement of the poem's opening line rapidly gathers pathos; the pause after "Farewell", the placing of "and joy" to claim our attention after the second comma. Throughout, indeed, the dramatic placing of syntax, of brief phrases and curtailed sentences, combined with the variations of stress and the grammatical ellipses and inversions, intensify the effect of choking back emotion: the shape and movement of the line is dictated by emotion as much as by considerations of public rhetoric. The repeated use of the intimate second person, together with such phrases as "lov'd boy," introducs a sense of *personal* speech between father and child. And does any father *really* believe that his children are only "lent" to him? Here the financial terminology and the cold "exacted" (l.4) are in painful tension with "lov'd boy" and the current of emotion felt in the verse. Again, does the poet really wish to "loose all father" (l.5)? A startling line, this — the emphasis achieved by the inverted first foot, the exclamatory "O", the emotionally conditioned syntax, the awkwardly placed "now", the *conditional* mood. A yearning effect, yes; but the exclamation arises from the fact that the poet *can't* lose all father — what he really wants is to *return* to the state of "father". (The archaic spelling "loose" perhaps also has an intensive effect, suggesting the senses of both "lose" and "loosen".) The stages of the consolatory argument are knit together by the sequence "lent", "loose", "lament"; the effect of the two consolatory questions which follow (ll.5-8), because they *are* simply rhetorical and don't get answered, leaving a sense of uncertainty, is to counter somewhat the sought reassurance, an

effect aided by a certain awkwardness in the movement of these lines. And putting his son's death in this light — it is better *for the child* this way — is paradoxically an expression of solicitude for the child, which has the effect of calling into question the father's stoical acceptance of his child's death. The swiftly elliptical transition from the idea of the child's soul resting in peace ("soft" is a delicate touch) to that of the visitor in the graveyard enquiring whose grave this is, and then to the wittily poignant reply (a poignancy intensified if the dead child itself is imagined as making the reply, which is a way of reading the line), acts as a kind of crystallisation. The idea of "making" suggests some proprietorship which in part contradicts the idea of the child being "lent"; try as he may, the poet cannot "loose all father,." and the final couplet in effect confirms his attachment to the child, because it reasserts his love for it. However, the epigrammatic paradox and the grammatical strain of this couplet end the poem with a wrenching effort at acceptance, at denying the attachment. The epigram seems an almost violent attempt to pull away from the emotional structure I've been tracing, but nothing in the poem, surely, convinces us of the poet's success in denying the attachment, and throughout, the poem gains poignancy from the insistence on seeing the child as a person, not just an occasion for a sermon.

If Jonson's poem cannot be read as one of easy or unfeeling acceptance of the poet's loss, Jon Silkin has the marks of the sort of post-Romantic, post-Lawrentian modern writer for whom not to "feel" is the ultimate sin. The kind of seriousness which seems claimed from the outset by "Death of a Son"[3] is unconditional, it refuses anything like Jonson's public attitude of stoicism or mode of witty epigram. The grimly earnest, even ponderous, chewing over of the experience means that the reader has no expectations roused which are to be subtly countered or manipulated. Formal beauty, or Jonson's lyric fluency, seem deliberately avoided; the style is self-consciously stumbling, gauche, proletarian. There is a sense that wit, lyric grace, or the facility of educated speech would be a distraction of some kind, a betrayal of a harsh but vulnerable authenticity which is at once both manner and subject of the poem. There is something akin to

Blake's or Wordsworth's simplicities, a sense that the thing will speak for itself if only it can be kept raw, free of the corrupting elegance of learning, taste and decorum.[4] The effort to keep clear of these is manifested in the stumbling, repetitious rhetoric Silkin employs.

The tone seems to mix something like a neutral observing stance with an impassioned directness: in both these ways at once the poem is saying "Look at this! Look at this!" to the reader; with modulations from time to time which hint at religious awe in the face of the spectacle being described:

> He did not bless silence
> Like bread, with words.
>
> The silence rose and became still.

This becomes explicit at lines 30-31 with "Something religious in his silence, / Something shining in his quiet." This quasi-religious note of reverence for "life" is found elsewhere in Silkin's poetry; this pitiful child, a fly, a worm, a daisy, the "unnecessary beasts," even grass, are all approached with the same puzzled awe. But it is a strenuously self-conscious reverence, refusing mysticism, and divorced from traditional resonances or doctrine; for Silkin, there are no sustaining religious certainties, whether private or public, and there can be no appeal to the orthodoxies against which Jonson sets his personal loss. Yet the poem has its highly deliberate structure, the rhetorical series of repetitions and parallelisms —

> Something has ceased to come along with me.
> Something like a person: something very like one

— which expresses its groping and rather awed earnestness, its probing and hesitancy, its uncertainty, but at the same time suggests that the poet is trying to persuade, to enforce a particular response from the reader. The result of these two simultaneous postures in the poem — emotional insistence and a sort of neutral, hard, empirical stare[5] — is that the reader both knows too well how he is supposed to respond, and yet, since he is not referred to any of Jonson's kind of consolations or orthodoxies, is somewhat at a loss to know exactly what significance he is supposed to attach to the experience

presented. That he *is* supposed to attach significance seems clear from the intent seriousness and the quasi-religious vibrations. "Impersonality" is not sought by the poet, yet at the same time a deliberate strategy of alienation is adopted, of jarring the reader out of any complacency of which he may be guilty by bringing him face to face with this harshly pitiful spectacle. It would seem also that part of Silkin's intention is to probe a sense of his *own* emotional inadequacy. Kenneth Allot reports him as saying that as the child died "I felt, or it seemed as though I felt, nothing."[6] The bearing of such author's statements on the work itself is nearly always problematical and I don't want to offer an over-simple "intentionalist" reading. But I think the poem does involve something like a reversal of Jonson's strenuous attempt to detach himself from the pain of his loss; Silkin seems to want to feel more than he did in the immediacy of the experience.

The continuously hesitant movement suggests a difficulty in talking about the poem's subject, an anxiety not to falsify its nature. The child is "something . . . something like a person," and in the final two stanzas it is "*as if* he could speak," "*as if* he could be sorry": it exists in an area somewhere between human existence and wholly inert objects. The stanza-shape, with its shorter and longer lines, and tendency to disintegrate, gives the effect of turning something over without ever quite gaining a firm purchase on it; the avoidance of rhyme further suggests a lack of clinching certainties. There is not, obviously, Jonson's control and compression; the poet keeps having to start over again. This formal uncertainty mirrors the poet's emotional uncertainty, but the attempt to achieve emotional intensity is perhaps rather crudely over-insistent, with occasional portentous banality —

> this
> Was something to do with death.

And does the concentration on a sort of indeterminate state of existence between humanity and objects really yield any strikingly grasped insight? To what extent does the poem represent a strained effort to jack up the poet's sense of his own emotional adequacy, in the course of which we are simply given

the experience with a sort of pretentious rawness?

The witty element in Jonson's language and imagery implies an argument, one which is integral to the mental effort to get things under control. Silkin's images merely observe; they jolt us by their bruised pitifulness and accumulate pathos, but, in themselves, carry no further implications. Of course, the resulting abstract and static quality reflects his subject — the abstractness of something which ought to be humanly individualised, the staticness of something which ought to be active. The "silence" to which the poem returns insistently, while suggesting the ominous inertia of the child, also seems to denote some inexpressible (hence silent) inward source of life and feeling, which paradoxically must be embodied in sound — singing, laughter, words — if it is to find outward expression (ll.6-11)[7]. This "pact" (quite an effective idea) is omitted unnaturally from the child's existence: silence is its "livingness", which becomes "still" when it dies. Silkin's imagery has a post-Romantic non-rational atmosphere, but with an assertive anti-Romantic hardness. Consider the simile within the simile in the fourth stanza: almost jarring transitions between terms — a child like a house, houses like birds (in what sense *are* houses like birds?) and then the leap to the "other / Birds singing crazy in its chimneys" at 1.25. There is a sort of sedulous logiclessness in the connections; the thought is fairly intricate, but this is unwitty, of course, the opposite of Jonsonian discretion in the use of surprise and ingenuity. The mentally abnormal child "did not forsake silence" (1.12) and so stands in a perplexing relationship to "life" and "feeling". In the sixth and seventh stanzas, from 1.19, the movement becomes more clotted — consider the viscous awkwardness with which consonants cling to each other in a sequence such as "A house / Of stones and blood in breathing silence" (11.23-4) — intensifying the effect of the dumb inexplicable solidity of this "something". "Stones and blood" are paired, "breathing" is placed in juxtaposition with "silence", "tears" are like "stones" — the organic and the inorganic are perplexingly inter-penetrated. The birds sing "crazy" in its chimneys: "crazy" might possibly be read as indicating normally busy and carefree

children, which gives us a rather easy pathos, but more likely abnormally incoherent and "shrill" ones (1.38) are meant — other patients in the mental hospital; the ambiguity (whether or not it is intended) is not of the sort which reduces to order, but extends the perplexity which the whole structure of the poem embodies. In any case, the "shrillness" is distressing in relation to this "silent" creature on the point of death. The last two stanzas use an expressionistic technique of distorted emphasis. Can an eye be said to look inward, and a "look" to stop (as distinct from somebody ceasing to look at something)? Can silence be said to rise and become still? These are again logicless statements, but how else does the poet find words for what has happened? The final stanza puts the pathos rawly before us with an effect of claiming that anything other than such directness would be a betrayal; "Red as a wound" perhaps confronts the poet himself with the fact that he "felt nothing", but is clearly meant to shock us with its isolated primary force. The weakness, I think, is that the poem is about perplexity — how *does* one feel about a child which is one's own yet perhaps better dead, and about its death; how does one even find a way of talking about it? — yet the effect of this final stanza is not just raw and shocking (which might be justified by the nature of the subject), but bluntly attempts to *determine* an emotional response in a way which is at odds with the poem's expressive hesitancy and uncertainty. "The fineness of the poem," writes Merle Brown, ". . . depends on never losing one's sense that an actual father is observing in pain and love his own one-year-old son."[8] Perhaps, but Silkin leaves us no room in which to find and test that sense for ourselves, and it seems to me a delicate question whether this is not a crudeness rather than a fineness.

That "pain and love" do inform the poem seems self-evident; there can be no more doubt of Silkin's sincerity than of Jonson's. But what Jonson's poem, seen beside Silkin's, makes one feel is that Silkin's sincerity is being put on show. Certainly, the poem successfully enacts the poet's perplexity, and the condition of the child is memorably realised. There is a position implicit in the poem that it is not only "human" suffering, with its "educated" expression, which is worthy of our attention; and a

question following from this: how might we sanely take account of a whole suffering universe of which we are only part and of which our human perspective is a specialised one? The poem's successes, I think, allow this sort of questioning to come through in a hardwon way. At the same time, the position itself seems to me suggestive of an extremism to which "Death of a Son" is prone. The poem is a relatively early piece by Silkin and I don't mean to offer it as characteristic of all his work, but it is allied to a poetic mode of recent decades which expresses and exhorts a compassionate (or, less fortunately, sentimental) softness of sensibility while brandishing a tough anti-romantic hardness and intricacy of style and attitude. The willed strenuousness and stumbling articulation in this poem witness to an anxiety about unfeelingness which burdens a good deal of contemporary poetry. One accepts that Silkin is consciously rejecting Jonson's sort of linguistic facility, and that he is attempting an expressionistic directness of presentation in which language tensely enacts the poem's subject. What he sees as some of the problems of writing poetry today are discussed in his Introduction to *Poetry of the Committed Individual* (Penguin, 1973) — problems of "socially committed art," of confronting the reading public with "exacting" poetry, of the legacy of Imagism. The anxiety about unfeelingness, about being adequately *serious,* can be clearly perceived in this discussion; while there seems to be an assumption in Silkin's kind of poetry that language which is not wholly hard and intense is trivial. Yet Jonson's obstinately stands as an example of a poetic method which compasses more than Silkin's, which seems *more* exacting, whatever the problems of the modern poet may be. It isn't that the firm definitions of Jonson's moral world, often talked about, are a too-tempting refuge for the modern reader, because we have seen how in the poetry those definitions become shifting and tentative, how Jonson's anguished definiteness about his predicament itself includes and is intensified by fugitive uncertainties about the proffered consolations. Silkin seems to insist on the urgent necessity of what he is saying and presents the experience, as I suggested at the outset, almost as an end in itself[9], but Jonson requires us to

make the recognition, at various levels, that his poem was to him necessary, and to see that the necessity arises in *pursuing* a way of life.

NOTES

[1]*Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (London: Oxford University Press, 1925-52), Vol. XI, p. 9. I am using Herford and Simpson's text of the poem, Vol. VIII, p. 41.

[2]Wesley Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study in the Plain Style* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), p. 236.

[3]"Death of a Son" first appeared in *The Peaceable Kingdom* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954); the text can most readily be found in *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 191, or *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 383.

[4]Merle Brown, in her article "Stress in Silkin's Poetry and the Healing Emptiness of America," *Contemporary Literature* (University of Wisconsin), 18, no. 3 (Summer 1977), 361-90, summarises statements by Silkin of his view that "the act of being" is more important than "Art" (see p. 373). Merle Brown's article did not appear until after my essay was written, but it is interesting to compare her reading of "Death of a Son" with mine and I have tried to notice some of her points.

[5]The terms "neutral" and "empirical" applied to Silkin's poetry are borrowed from Terence Eagleton. See his analysis of two poems by Silkin in *Criticism in Action*, ed. Maurice Hussey (London: Longmans, 1969), pp. 76-84.

[6]*The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse*, ed. Kenneth Allot (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 383.

[7]The quasi-religious note mentioned above. Merle Brown suggests that the poem might be read — incorrectly — "as a purely modernist descent into the abyss of Being" in which "the poet moves mystically . . . out of this world." *Op.cit.*, p. 368.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 370.

[9]Merle Brown quotes Silkin's statement that suffering "is perhaps the only state during which we are innocent." *Ibid.*, p. 364.