

Poetry Using Symbols: A Selection of Poems on Themes Dire and Dreadful By G. Eraclides

Introduction

Please note: I have used symbolism judiciously, hoping to enhance the various poem's affects on the reader. I believe also, that the occasional vagueness (but not inscrutability) of a symbol, adds to the mystery of poems, especially poems with the kinds of themes on display in this assessment task. Some poems feature only one or two symbols while the final work, uses symbols in almost every stanza. Because we are dealing with poems, the spacing may be greater than normal, to allow stanza completeness on a page.

1) The first poem is 'I once saw magic in the veins of things'. (Published in Philosophy Now 2009)

This poem is in the form of a villanelle, which is normally used as a cheery, 'round song'. It comes from Italy, in the days of hard work in fields or around farms. The repetition and rhythm is intended to keep the farm labourers engaged in their work and to make the time pass faster.

I have used the traditional form, but with a sombre theme. The symbols are both specific: 'nature's signalmen', 'even(ing) tide'; and general: 'magic' represents the ineffable mystery of existence which we have lost due to our pride in another symbol of power we can manipulate: science.

In addition, the poem makes use of metaphor, such as: 'the lie which blooms'.

I once saw magic in the veins of things

Yet say, what point there is in going on
With base and bleached unsuccoured life we lead
To learn, to know, to judge, and then be gone?

Still nature's signalmen herald the dawn
The lie which blooms and we await with greed
Yet say, what point there is in going on--

Seared sands and endless wastes roll ever on
From azzure seas expired by our misdeed--
To learn, to know, to judge, and then be gone

Imbued with secret life, our pantheon
We unlock with science wielded speed
Yet say, what point there is in going on--

We Godless gods can pierce life's shell, anon
 Disperse, compress; as we will, change our seed
 To learn, to know, to judge, and then be gone

As we approach the even tide whereon
 All things finally will their secrets cede--
 Yet say, what point there is in going on--

We look inside and see the magic gone
 Brick on brick left behind to meet our need
 To learn, to know, to judge, and then be gone

Is this the end we hoped to find, upon
 Displacing God? No matter, we are freed,
 Yet say, what point there is in going on
 To learn, to know, to judge, and then be gone.

2) The second poem is another cheery format – an attempt at a particular form of the sestina, entitled 'God's Dispensation'. The one true God banishes the false with an open ended future for the souls in human form. The ocean is a symbol for fate, soul but a fragment of the divine. Enjoy.

God's Dispensation

Fate's monstrous ocean peaks of woe
 So toss and flay the human soul,
 That soul must wonder if this life
 Has been wisely chosen at this time;
 Perhaps better to have cried 'pass'
 To the gods' offer of yet another home.

Divine fragments need human form as home
 Even when three score and ten years of woe
 Is fate's evil decree that must come to pass;
 For as bodies need the incubus of soul
 To know more than flesh in their journey through time
 So soul needs body to know the tastes of life.

Gods know well the joys of creating life
 As they sit among marvels in their celestial home
 Plotting against each other in the oceans of time,
 Contending for misbegotten flesh in woe;

They think to send down their divine essences called soul
To gain advantage and make prideful plans come to pass.

They dare to think whatever comes to pass
Will serve the contest they have made of life;
But bodies obey other laws when fused with soul,
And make secret alliance in their earth bound home
With an older power, whose vow is to end woe
For humankind and banish upstart gods for all time.

‘For this I ask only obedience through human time
To all that I decree will come to pass.
Beyond this troubled realm will be no woe
For know this: Above all I am Lord of Life
And though you toil upon your earthly home
Each human vessel yet holds a part of my soul;

False gods at play do not dispense divine soul
Save what I allowed for the merest time
When first I fashioned these gods a lofty home
Above earth bound beasts; but it came to pass
They thought as children, and made cruel sport of life.
Now I begin their time for endless woe!’

God’s plan for the human soul came to this pass:
It wrought vast changes in time, and human life
Upon its earthly home, was not bound to end in woe.

3) The next short poem is another cheery attempt, this time at haiku; the symbol of the crimson flower is self-evident:

Silent house at night.
Gunshot shakes street scape--
Crimson flower on white wall.

4) The final poem is ‘A walk in the finely nuanced garden of an asylum for the wicked’. It has no particular form, but I would hope it is not seen as merely chopped-up prose, but rather ‘free verse’, although the ‘free’ elements are in an institutional setting which provides a welter of symbols and metaphors.

The moon is a symbol conventionally associated with madness; the ‘bearded horse’ represents the ongoing world outside the asylum; the ‘skin...reptilian red’ is but a symbol of the alienation of the schizophrenic inmate, who is almost decomposing in the garden where he sits for therapy; similarly, the ‘red sky’ is how he sees the world – in fact ‘red’ is a major symbol in this poem (red sky, reptilian red, wine); the chalice and wine in stanza 8 refer to the Christ and the last supper (one of history’s great dinner parties) – the allusion is to the symbol of wine as the blood-essence of what we really are: humans with a spark of divinity; ‘Mathew’ is another symbol, for the moral imperatives of a religious life; the ‘wand of ambiguity’ is the irrational at the core of our being and reality; nanny and Pharaoh are nurses and other doctors; there is much else in symbol and metaphor as well as philosophy, in this narrow world of our inmate and his nemesis, the relentless Mathew.

Hang on to your sanity.

A walk in the finely nuanced garden of an asylum for the wicked

Life is, I hear you say
 Life is like
 Cyber mice eating cyber cheese:
 ‘The nourishment just ain’t there,
 Pardner.’

The cabbage turns a leaf to me
 Saying ‘Do not mind my muddy feet
 Fair Squire, but please take my dainty hand.’

Red sky and bearded horse
 Clip-clopping down the lane
 And bay leaves smell the air.

My skin turns reptilian red
 As dry scales flee this body in the breeze.

The taste of honey syrup too will pass
 Chased away by lemon drops from plastic trays
 Team-working lions
 Hunting hapless zebra

‘I hear what you’re feeling,
 Babe—
 Can you smell how I look?’

Mathew flourishes his flowery cape
 Pencilled eyebrows highway straight
 Glares and fumes
 Hopes I’ll shrink
 ‘But does a cyber mouse need any nourishment?
 And what is nourishment?
 Let’s define this curious sound.’

Poor Mathew, listed first
 Confuses chalice with the wine
 Thinks to drown my ego
 In his challenging remarks.

But my wave-front is strong
 And I vector him to hell
 And will not be spoken to
 In a manner such as this
 By a bunch of atoms
 Insolently swirling.

‘If a Buddha can stand to peel a grape
 Then I can drink the wine
 Grid-bound though I be.’

The moon rises
 And the tendrils of its madness
 Gnaw at my nerves;
 ‘Pou pas paidaki mou, pou pas?’
 I wish I knew where I was bound

To put the old mother at ease.

The mellifluous rodents of my superego
Gleefully announce
'His bilges are open,
Give him more syrup'.

But I fling my wand of ambiguity
In the gap between the words
And jump through to more exotic
Ornamentals.

A nanny smiles at a child
Like a Barracuda eyeing a shoal of fish
And the Pharaoh
Still mysterious
Will soon devour his people.

The confident table
Is unmoved
And his friend the chair
Whispers to me
'Just sit on me and make him happy'.
'Write with me, with me'
Says the pen.

And I plough the paper
And the table winces
And the bed tucks Mathew into its sheets
And the iron binds
And the door is sealed
And the soul is trapped
Beyond penance
Beyond redemption.