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Something to say

by Scott Bartley

If a poem is to have a subject, it should be communicated in only the most oblique fashion. Or so the poet and critic Allen Grossman implied in saying, "a poem is about something the way a cat is about the house." Better yet, others have thought, a poem ought to have no subject at all. The modernist Archibald MacLeish, for instance, commanded "A poem should not mean/ But be." Yet there can be no denying that the subject of, say, Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" is integral to the poem's interest, as Daniel Brown points out in his new book, *Subjects in Poetry*. In the poem's first stanza, sunbathers "along the sand" face the sea. The scene is familiar enough, but Frost defamiliarizes *why* they do so, finding in the image a subject more significant than a vacation pastime. To Frost, it's as if the beachgoers are hopelessly looking out to the waters for a hidden meaning in life:

> They cannot look out far,
> They cannot look in deep,
> But when was that ever a bar
> To any watch they keep?

Though the sea is vast and deep, the beachgoers only ever see the smallest patch of its surface, mistaking an endless superficial search for a profound one. Following Randall Jarrell, one of the earliest critics to perceive Frost's greatness, Brown takes "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" as an example of the way a poem's subject can resonate even when the language and technique of the poem are restrained. Of course, the value of a poem's subject can vary from "minimal" to, as is the case with Frost's poem, "considerable," but the way a poet realizes his or her subject always has the potential to "imbue" the poem "with interest or import or truth." In *Subjects in Poetry*, Brown delivers a brief, spirited, and joyful defense of the choice and treatment of poetic subject as integral both to poetic art and to the way poetic art implicates a human reader's most sincere concerns.

While it is a truism that a poem's form and content are intimately related, Brown's argument approaches the poem more as human utterance than abstract pattern. Drawing on Frost, whose playful yet provocative axioms are a touchstone throughout the book, Brown elaborates on the

idea of a poem's subject as "something to say." The poem's "way of saying" is central to how it instantiates a general theme—say, the divine—in a particularized treatment. George Herbert's poem "Heaven" is an ingenious example. Here, the poet represents a dialogue between himself and an echo. On the one hand, the echo merely copies the last syllable or two of the poet's most recent question. On the other hand, the echo reveals God's answer to the poet's question in that repetition. Having learned after his first few questions that the echo is a holy voice, Herbert asks,

> Then tell me, what is that supreme delight?
> *Echo.* *Light.*
> Light to the minde: what shall the will enjoy?
> *Echo.* *Joy.*
> But are there cares and businesse with the pleasure?
> *Echo.* *Leisure.*
> Light, joy, and leisure; but shall they persever?
> *Echo.* *Ever.*

Herbert's decision to "say" his subject via a dialogue between himself and an echo reveals the immanence and omnipresence of the divine in our own world. Considering this poem and a host of others—from Herbert's peer John Donne through E. A. Robinson and Thomas Hardy to William Carlos Williams—Brown sketches out a taxonomy of the way poems can say their subjects: direct "expression," more indirect "evocation," and, as in Herbert's poem, "address," with subcategories and gradations of each. Some of Brown's classifications are questionable, and he admits that no taxonomy could capture all the ways poems can treat their subjects. But the virtue of Brown's discussion is to present poems' subjects as related to but distinct from their themes. While themes are general and can be shared by multiple poems, a poem's subject is embedded in its particularized utterance.

As a poem shapes its subject, the subject in turn shapes the poem, the poet, and even the history of poetry. While literary innovation is often thought of as the development of new techniques—like breaking iambic pentameter and beginning to write in free verse—subjects can make the art of poetry new, too. Think again of Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep." One of its artistic virtues is that nobody ever saw beachgoers like this before. And if a subject is "something to say," it can also directly contribute to the development of the poet's "voice"—his or her distinctive tone, syntax, and rhythms. In a brief yet striking example, Brown suggests how, after cycling through the influences of Yeats, Auden, and Hardy, Larkin found his own voice in part by finding his own subjects. Directly treating the material of mid-century, middle-class British life, Larkin wrote poetry that *sounded* like nobody else's before him or since:

> My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose—
> In pigtails, clutching a reluctant cat;

Or furred yourself, a sweet girl-graduate;
Or lifting a heavy headed-rose
Beneath a trellis, or in a trilby hat

(Faintly disturbing, that, in several ways)—
From every side you strike at my control

Larkin's ironic sense of life is still influenced by Hardy, but the photos of a young girl with her pet, or in a trilby hat, or at a college graduation, is only in Larkin's own world, and so is the tone that these scenes afford him, such as the droll humor in the parenthetical.

Because subjects are sourced from life, their contribution to a poem's achievement extends beyond the purely aesthetic as well. As Brown says, "choosing a subject in light of life calls upon every faculty we have," artistic but also "intellectual, moral, spiritual." Showing just how intertwined a poem's subject is with the broader world, Brown increasingly draws examples from his own life and poetry as the book progresses. He relates how, as a child, he was terrified of death's oblivion and, as an adult, thought he'd write a poem on this subject. Yet after the many intervening years, he cannot write the poem because finds that he's no longer as afraid of death. *That* becomes the poem's subject instead:

How, years having passed,
We find ourselves assessing it
Far less frequently, and more by rote
Than necessity: our purpose not

To sound the wound so much as
To remind ourselves it's still there.
How one day we're suddenly aware
Of its no longer being there.

Brown has meditated on his subject for so long that it no longer exists, and the poem he ends up writing becomes a testament to this entire process. It's risky for an author to include a discussion of his own poems alongside those of masters such as Herbert, Hardy, Frost, and Larkin, but Brown's discussion of his own work becomes the perfect illustration of how "pondering a subject is a practicum in life."

A consistent delight is the enthusiasm Brown brings to the finest details of poems. He frequently refers to a poem's artistic "coups," often some striking rhythm, image, or word choice. Yet, oddly enough when one considers the book's aim, Brown doesn't always put these evaluations of a poem's artistry in service of advancing an argument about that poem's subject. For instance, Brown conducts a close reading of Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," a sonnet in which the young poet is so impressed by the English Renaissance translation that he compares himself as a reader to great figures making astronomical and geographical discoveries:

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
> He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
> Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
> Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Commenting on Keats's diction, Brown observes that "only a poet of genius would have couched the men's speculation as a 'wild surmise' " or attributed the verb "swims" to a planet. On the poem's music, Brown writes, "not least of the poem's triumphs is its entire last line, which offers, within a commanding overall rhythm, the arresting, initial *Silent*, the alliteration of ***p****eak* with *u****p****on,* and the breathtaking close on the surprise-rhyming *Darien*." This is all well observed. But on the relationship between these features and the poem's subject, Brown only offers that a subject must be realized in words "worthy" of it—hardly an interpretation of precisely *how* Keats's words communicate his subject. One might consider Brown's occasional inability to corral his close readings into an argument about the poem's subject as instances of critical oversight. Yet Brown's method also lets in an important crosscurrent to his argument: a good subject undergirds a poem but never limits it. Something in the poem's artistry that is ultimately "unknowable," as Brown says of Herbert's moving conclusions, even "miraculous," as he says of Donne's rhyming, continues to inspire readers well after they've come to terms with the poem's meaning. Those who pick up Brown's book will not just find an intelligent argument but impassioned encouragement to share in such inspiration.

Scott Bartley recently completed a PhD in English at Princeton University.