

Cold Monuments Animated: A Receptive Response to John Russell Brown*

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J. R. Brown's contribution to the *Connotations* symposium on "Poetry as Procreation" was an animated and animating paper on the reception of poetry. His choice of topic, as the paper demonstrates, was guided by a belief that poetry has no life of its own, outside of people's imaginations, and so the advent of a poem as a living thing is effected in the reader's more or less active imaginative response. Or, as Brown suggests, drawing on the paradigmatic case of the theatre, a poem's actual realization takes place in the event of its "performance" in the individual reader's mind. Now from this perspective, to talk about poetry as "procreation" is inadequate, because it is to attribute the life of a poem exclusively to the poet, a fallacy that is characteristic of many hubris-stricken poets who, to Brown's obvious indignation, seem to forget whom they are writing for—and *with*. For Brown, "procreation" is only a metaphor, and an inappropriate one at that, disregarding as it does the collective, cultural and public, aspect of poetry and the multiplicity of agents involved in giving life to it over time. "Giving life" is, indeed, the more precise, almost literal, term for what Brown seeks to emphasize. Although his "three accounts of the reception of poetry" also correspond to the generative issue signified by "procreation," his main concern seems to be with the *animation* of poems; with how the "monuments" into which they cool after the passionate imaginative processes that generate them subside are re-animated in and through the reader's creative response.

*Reference: John Russell Brown, "Cold Monuments: Three Accounts of the Reception of Poetry," *Connotations* 9.1 (1999/2000): 34-42 .

As a reader, I like Brown's approach, because it centers on my own experience of literary texts, which is, quite frankly, what matters to me the most. I share the view that poetic meaning is first and foremost a matter of subjective, experiential significance, and I am happy to lay claim to my share of responsibility in its creation—or simply *my share in it*. When I read a poem, it is mine! It is intimately mine, in a way, even if my interpretation of it is completely unoriginal. Borges's story about Pierre Menard *The Author of Don Quixote*, who actually re-writes—rather than copies—the original *Don Quixote* word by word, epitomizes this poetics of intimacy (or cannibalism) through an illuminating hyperbole. However, from within this reader-oriented perspective, the diminution of the role of the author in Brown's account seems to me to overlook the interactive, mutual and intersubjective aspect of poetic animation, which I experience as essential to the reading process. Poems animate us in as much as we animate them, largely because they embody something of the poet's spirit in them that moves us. And as spirits are of the essence here (when speaking of animation and of poetic metaphors that, like Keats's Grecian urn, "tease us out of thought" with ontological ambiguities), let me illustrate my point by reference to the haunted metaphors of animation to which Brown alludes.

To make his point about the audience's role as "at least part-creators of a play's life" and possibly as "responsible for the 'best' of it," Brown emphasizes the relatively minor role of (bad? Elizabethan?) actors as conceived by Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who defines them as mere "*shadows*," meaning (says Brown), "imitations, reflections, portraits, shapes, not creatures with real life; perhaps they are like phantoms, for that, too, was an Elizabethan meaning of the word." The conception of the actors as imitations, reflections and portraits, coupled with their definition, in *Henry V*, as "*ciphers*," answers the question regarding their role in Brown's comparison, mediated by Shakespeare's, between the theatrical and the poetic performance. The actors, who mediate between the text of the play and the audience in the theatre, correspond to the poetic text, not to the reader; they figure as a layer in the representational structure of the poem rather than as interpreting agents, or they simply stand for

the words of the poem. On the other hand, as a metaphor for the words of the poem (or its images), the actors foreground that active aspect of the poem which animates us, attributing to the poem an effective agency that acts on our imagination. Thus, the comparison with theatrical performance foregrounds the interactive dynamics at work in poetic reception, the essence of which is, quite simply, that we respond to the poem because it speaks to us. It speaks to us in “cipher” which it invites us to decipher; in ‘*characters*’ that are ‘nonentities’ and ‘mere nothings’ (OED “cipher”), just like the “airy nothing[s]” of the imagination to which, still according to Theseus (in his earlier, proverbial account of the poet), the poet gives “a local habitation and a name” in his fictional world; and through the “shapes” of “things unknown” which, says Brown, being more or less synonymous with the “shadows” that actors are, require a reader’s response to give them living substance.

But the poetic text also needs an author, or at least the spirit of one, to move the reader to animate it. The mutual animation of text and reader could not take place without the poet’s presence in the poem—as a ghost, to be sure, but nonetheless a present one, haunting its “local habitation” or inhabiting its “cold monument.” Evidence for such a presence is to be found in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 107. The poem is a “monument” for the poet’s lover, and as such, as Brown says, “exists only as an inscribed block of stone or piece of parchment” until the reader—first the lover and then others—comes to “find” it and realize its commemorative function. But the monument—first a “tomb” and then (when found) an “effigy”—will at no point in the sonnet give life to the lover (other than as a reader); the one who is to “live in this poor rhyme” is the poet, to whom death “subscribe[s]” (‘submits,’ ‘yields,’ ‘gives in,’ ‘signs away’ or ‘yields up’[OED] his power), overcome by his triumphant rhyme. And how does the poet live in his rhyme? As a spirit, to be sure, but, in Sonnet 81, at least, one which can actually animate the reader and, by pneumatic extension, also the lover.

The earth can yield me but a common grave,
 When you entombed in men’s eyes shall lie.
 Your monument shall be my gentle verse,

Which eyes not yet created shall o'erread,
 And tongues to be your being shall rehearse
 When all the breathers of this world are dead.
 You still shall live—such virtue hath my pen—
 Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

Here, by contrast to Sonnet 107, the lover does get to be resurrected from the monument-tomb that is the poem thanks to the transference of the poet's animating breath, or spirit. While at first he is merely "*entombed in men's eyes*" that "o'erread" the inscription on his "monument," in the final couplet the lover is revived. "You still shall live," the poet promises him, "in the *mouths of men*" who will breathe life into your nostrils, as it were, while 'rehearsing' this poem. The rehearsal will not be a mere repetition of the poem, such as might substantiate the monument and realize its commemorative function, but an actual re-enactment of the poetic process and of the thrust of the poet's subjectivity which animated it in the first place. Something of that subjectivity and its thrust is still alive and present in the poem, inscribed in its music, or some other trans-verbal forms of materiality, and waiting to be incorporated by the reader in the "oral" act of the poem's re-articulation. That something is embodied in the poet's "breath," which designates both his "spirit" and his "life," as well as his spectral aspect as spirit—"the type of things insubstantial, volatile or fleeting" (as in Shakespeare's *Lucr.* 212: "A dream, a breath, a froth of feeling joy"; *OED* 5a, 3c). For the poet's spirit is embodied in his "utterance" or "speech" (yet other senses of *breath*: *OED*, 9a), as are his synonymous and metonymic "will expressed in sound" (*ibid.*) and the feelings for his beloved that animate his "gentle verse." Indeed, such virtue has the poet's pen, that it makes us re-experience his gentleness for his beloved and his wish to prolong his presence, and thereby rekindle his own flame. That this is what the poem is all about is suggested by the structure of lines 5-8 of the sonnet. The parallelism in

The earth can yield me but a common grave,
 Then you entombed in men's eyes shall lie

suggests the poet's disadvantage in terms of burial place compared to his lover, whom he intends to join in his improved lodgings in the following

line on the strength of that very parallelism: “my verse” in “your monument shall be my gentle verse” becomes another place (like “your monument” which is synonymous with ‘your tomb’—the “eyes” where “you entombed . . . shall lie”), which the poet appropriates by way of the contrastive juxtaposition with “your monument.” Thus, the squatting (in the lover’s monument) is established as a *fact* so as to avoid the initial, less enticing *possibility*: “The earth can yield me but a common grave,” so let me yield me a better one, our common resting place in my gentle verse. I will creep in there with you, and haunt your tomb till the end of days.

The reception theory emerging from this interpretation is far from suggesting that in articulating a poem, the reader simply reenacts the poet’s experience, or that, as Riffataire suggested in his interpretation of Baudelaire’s “Les chats,” the competent reader’s response is always already embodied in the text.¹ I fully agree with J. R. Brown that the reader brings his own subjective, private and cultural experience into his necessarily re-creative response to the poem; that “because each reader or audience member has an imagination that has been fuelled by an individual and particular life-experience, each will find a different experience when that imagination joins with the poet’s and so brings a poem to new and unprecedented life” (42 above). What I am suggesting is that any meaningful subjective response to a text is prompted by the encounter in which identification with the poet’s subjectivity takes place. That subjectivity is partly embodied in the poem: it is the libidinal and affective energies which are invested and inscribed in the language of the text. This intersubjective encounter is only the starting point, and may take the reader very far away in interpreting the poem, but it is nonetheless what stimulates him into response—if he submits to an experiential reading of the text, which, as Brown stresses, is essential to a good critical reading and to the reception of the “‘true’ quality” of a poem as meaningful to us. However original and creative our response may be, it is precisely the submission to the spirit in the poem—to the poet’s call to relive his passions and thereby embody his spirit—that generates our animated subjective response to it. This is even clearer in the similarly interactive case of still life drawing, where the more intense one’s objective concentration on the object, the more intimately subjective is one’s response to it. Paradoxically, it is the humility

of “look[ing] closely at [one’s] object,” as Wordsworth declared he was doing,² that enables one to appropriate it—as one’s subjective property. At issue is the humility of submitting to an other which Keats wrote about in his sonnet about re-reading *King Lear*, where he “picture[s] himself as ready to ‘burn through’ its “fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay” and so “humbly [to] assay / The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit” (ll. 5-8, in Brown). That this humility is in no way self-annihilating or uncreative is made very clear in Keats’s sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” where what “stout Cortez,” the metaphorical reader of Homer’s reader (Chapman), sees from the “peak in Darien” is so new, that none of his men nor even Keats himself can envision it. All we get is a sense of the unimaginable vastness of its scope, through the metonymical image of Cortez’s “eagle eyes” reflected in the men’s as they “Looked at each other with a wild surmise.”

As for Keats’s “Grecian Urn,” it is quite clear to me that without the ghost which haunts this ambiguous vessel, the “cold pastoral” inscribed on it would remain as cold as the ashes that it surely contains. The present missed between the “not yet” and the “never more” in this “still unravished” monument is the very reason why ghosts haunt the tombs of the dead and the lives of the living, whose breath they sometimes venture to possess. Between the anticipated moment and the missed one is desire, “haunt[ing] about” the “leaf fringed” urn that is both a tomb and monument, animating the writings we read and our readings alike.

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NOTES

¹See Michael Riffaterre, “Describing Poetic Structures: Two Approaches to Baudelaire’s ‘Les Chats,’” *Yale French Studies* 36-37 (1966): 200-42.

²The 1802 “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” is quoted from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., gen. ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 1987) 1386.