Variations on the Theme of Death in Poems by John Crowe Ransom and Gerard Manley Hopkins

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It would be hard to find any theme in any genre of artistic expression more commonly addressed than that of death, unless it be that of lost love. Though many of the reasons for this are obvious, perhaps the most profound is the understanding that only death is the means by which life’s value can be fully realized. In the symbolic expression of life’s end, we feel most deeply what has been forever lost—at the same time both the universality of death’s inevitability and the inexpressible uniqueness of that which has ceased to be. This short essay will look at two elegant poems, both of which begin the treatment of death from a child’s stunned denial of its permanence. Both poems begin in a roughly similar manner—though quite different in tone—but end in very different ways. John Crowe Ransom’s poem “Janet Waking” and Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Spring and Fall: to a young child,” portray a young girl’s first confrontation with the reality of death. Let us begin, therefore, with Ransom’s poem:

Janet Waking

Beautifully Janet slept
Till it was deeply morning. She woke then
And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,
To see how it had kept.

One kiss she gave her mother.
Only a small one gave she to her daddy
Who would have kissed each curl of his shining baby;
No kiss at all for her brother.

“Old Chucky, old Chucky!” she cried.
Running across the world upon the grass
To Chucky’s house, and listening. But alas,
Her Chucky had died.
It was a transmogrifying bee
Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,
But how exceedingly
And purply did the knot
Swell with the venom and communicate
Its rigor! Now the poor comb stood up straight
But Chucky did not.

So there was Janet
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown hen
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)
To rise and walk upon it.

And weeping fast as she had breath
Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"
And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

This poem begins with the playful depiction of Janet waking to the loving exchanges with her parents and the deliberate lack of such with her brother. She then rushes across the yard to her beloved hen, only to find it had died. The gently comic portrayal of the death from that "transmogrifying bee" is contrasted with Janet's grief, replete with the Biblical allusion to Christ's power to raise the dead and to walk on water. In comparison to these allusions, how pathetic seems Janet's beseeching cry, as she kneels in the wet grass, for her hen to "rise and walk upon it."

"Wake her from her sleep!" begs Janet, to no avail, and to no avail as well, could she "be instructed in how deep/Was the forgetful kingdom of death." The central unifying motif of the poem is the metaphoric "waking," both in its metaphysical and physical sense, again alluding to the Christian context of waking to another life beyond this one, to which, presumably in Christian terms, Chucky will have no access. Yet underlying the poem, of course, is the reader's awareness that Chucky's fate—unknown to Janet—awaited her as well. We need not spell out the implication for each of us readers. Thus, the theme of death finds expression in this very wry and gentle parody of the death of a hen. While the ostensible theme is the bird's demise, the true subject matter is Janet's innocent and poignant grief over it, and the fact that she does not yet understand the far more tragic reality of her own fleeting existence.

Hopkins' poem both complements and contrasts with Ransom's, dealing with a similar subject but treating it quite differently, in tone, style and content.
Spring and Fall:
to a young child

Márgarét, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Áh! as the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrow's springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

This poem is also about a young girl's first encounter with the reality of death, which is evoked by dying autumn foliage. Instead of presenting the child in delightfully innocent affection, as Ransom does, Hopkins addresses her directly. His starting point is the girl's grieving over "Goldengrove unleaving." Like Janet, Margaret will not be consoled and cannot understand the inevitability of life's cessation, but the poet goes on to remind us of another aspect of human experience—the fact that as our awareness grows, our sympathy gradually shifts from the death of 'the other' to that of self, and our own mortality. Therefore, the speaker tells Margaret that she will come not to care about the dying of the foliage, but will instead weep for herself and "know why."

In this poem as in Ransom's, the theme of death is embedded in a Biblical context, as we might expect of Hopkins, a Catholic priest. This reference takes us back to the myth of Eden (as in Goldengrove?) and the fall of humanity from grace, and hence the "blight man was born for," which in Christian theology is the price of Adam and Eve's original sin. "Sorrow's springs" arose from this original sin, of which the consequences are human mortality. For Hopkins this poem seems particularly dark, for even Christ's redemption is not mentioned as a mitigating aspect in that first blight—decay and death, like those worlds of wanwood. The time of year is incidental, because whether it be fallen leaves in autumn or a million invisible deaths of spring, these sorrows are the same, not to the child of course, but to the aging speaker. On the one hand, Ransom's poem remains focused on the child's bewilderment and grief, with a mixture of genuine empathy for her sadness and amusement at her naiveté over the death of a mere chicken. Hopkins, on the other hand, pays at least equal attention to the speaker himself,
his affection and concern for the child no doubt sincere, but his concern for her and his own mortality of perhaps even greater import. When he says at the end "It is the blight man was born for/It is Margaret you mourn for," he is perhaps saying as well: 'It is Hopkins I mourn for.' He grieves for himself, as all human beings who truly love life, grieve for themselves.

Ransom’s poem never leaves the realm of childhood and we are connected to death’s reality exclusively through the refusal of the child to accept it, as told by the speaker. In Hopkins’ work the child grows up, hardens gradually to death of the world but still weeps for the personal death that awaits her. In childhood only the “heart heard of” and the “ghost guessed” what the mouth and the mind could not express.

So much for the themes of the poems and their correspondences and divergences! Yet, these commentaries are merely the bare bones of the poems, neglecting the power of each work, which come into life through the words themselves—the rhythm and nuance of their language and form. Ransom’s poetic style is controlled and highly formal, but often belies this formal surface with irony and twisted syntax—not so twisted as to be ‘incorrect’ but enough so to be humorously strange. For example, the knot on Chucky’s head swells “exceedingly” and “purply.” The venom “communicates its rigor” with the pun on rigor, both as in strict adherence to its function and stiffness as in ‘rigor mortis.’ The hen itself is “translated far beyond the daughters of men” but not quite transported or transcendent, as a believer might write of human death. Despite this slightly bent use of words, the poem is strictly structured in the abba form of the first stanza, which is repeated strictly throughout. This death occurs outside the human sphere, and therefore, does not warrant the comforting assurances of afterlife, so with this finality, the poem ends, not with the child’s realization, but with Ransom’s didactic commentary.

Hopkins, on the other hand, leads us further down the path of human maturation, and in doing so ages both the child and himself. His style is also formal but the formality is more uniquely his own invention, exhibiting his famed ‘sprung rhythm,’ which adds vitality to many of the lines, and moves the poem forward in a kind of singsong nursery rhyme, suggestive of children’s banter. Hopkins’ emotive power lies in his magic with words, puns, and startling rhythms. Through the devices of pun and metaphor, he emphasizes two key concepts and their respective negations: that of leaving/unleaving and that of knowing/unknowing. Of course, the pun on falling leaves yields “unleaving,” which paradoxically constitutes ‘leaving.’ This leave-taking is the inevitable death “man was born for,” and is Margaret’s source of grieving. It is, as well, the “fall” both of human innocence (Margaret’s and Adam and Eve’s) and of autumn. Likewise, sorrow’s springs are the tears Margaret and all mankind must shed over this leaving. Furthermore, as with Ransom’s young protagonist, Margaret is not aware at first of why she grieves, though her heart has heard it (from the rustling leaves?) and her ghost has guessed it. Unlike Janet, Hopkins shows us Margaret as she grows older and colder, and her childlike unknowing turns into an increasingly dismal state of adult knowing. We might recall once again
the myth of Eden, when knowledge of the forbidden apple leads all mankind to the knowledge and experience of death. Though Hopkins’ poem lacks Ransom’s humor, it ends in equal if not greater pathos, evoking to the “forgetful kingdom of death” not as an abstraction, but as Margaret’s aging flesh and blood, whose opening images of youth and innocence, nonetheless, still linger.

References