

# January 2019

Happy New Year, everyone !

Duncan's recent secretive mission into our Civil Defence capabilities re-awakened Cold War memories, so, just to start the year with a bang (not an Eliotian "whimper") here are some poetry reflections!

At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 I decided not to do my Latin "prep". What on earth was the point when we would all be dead within three days? That cut no ice with Mr Lewis, our Latin teacher, and I ended up with a detention as a result. Later on, the school also had to sit through a dreadfully dire film showing what exactly would happen if Leeds (?) or somewhere got landed on with a hydrogen bomb. Neville Shute's book (and the later excellent film of) "On The Beach" backed up this nightmare just around the corner. The very funny Peter Porter poem that follows captures the flavour of those times – but it is very black humour, nevertheless.

## Your Attention Please (1983)

Peter Porter

The Polar D.E.W. \* has just warned that  
A nuclear rocket strike of  
At least one thousand megatons  
Has been launched by the enemy  
Directly at our major cities.  
This announcement will take  
Two and a quarter minutes to make,  
You therefore have a further  
Eight and a quarter minutes  
To comply with the shelter  
Requirements published in the Civil  
Defence Code – section Atomic Attack.  
A specially shortened Mass  
Will be broadcast at the end  
Of this announcement-  
Protestant and Jewish services  
Will begin simultaneously-  
Select your wavelength immediately  
According to instructions  
In the Defence Code. Do not  
Take well-loved pets (including birds)  
Into your shelter – they will consume  
Fresh air. Leave the old and bed-  
ridden, you can do nothing for them.

Remember to press the sealing  
Switch when everyone is in  
The shelter. Set the radiation  
Aerial, turn on the geiger barometer.  
Turn off your television now.  
Turn off your radio immediately  
The Services end. At the same time  
Secure explosion plugs in the ears  
Of each member of your family. Take  
Down your plasma flasks. Give your children  
The pills marked one and two  
In the C.D. green container, then put  
Them to bed. Do not break  
The inside airlock seals until  
The radiation All Clear shows  
(Watch for the cuckoo in your  
perspex panel), or your District  
Touring Doctor rings your bell.  
If before this, your air becomes  
Exhausted or if any of your family  
Is critically injured, administer  
The capsules marked 'Valley Forge'  
(Red pocket in No. 1 Survival Kit)  
For painless death. (Catholics  
Will have been instructed by their priests  
What to do in this eventuality.)  
This announcement is ending. Our President  
Has already given orders for  
Massive retaliation – it will be  
Decisive. Some of us may die.  
Remember, statistically  
It is not likely to be you.  
All flags are flying fully dressed  
On Government buildings – the sun is shining.  
Death is the least we have to fear.  
We are all in the hands of God,  
Whatever happens happens by His Will.  
Now go quickly to your shelters.

\*Distant Early Warning – radar stations

Do you like the “Valley Forge” euthanasia pills being in the *survival kit*? Another more sophisticated imagining of a post-nuclear holocaust is an eerily beautiful poem by the Scottish poet, Edwin Muir: “The Horses” from his last anthology “*One Foot in Eden*” (1956)

## The Horses - by Edwin Muir

Barely a twelvemonth after  
The seven days war that put the world to sleep,  
Late in the evening the strange horses came.  
By then we had made our covenant with silence,  
But in the first few days it was so still  
We listened to our breathing and were afraid.  
On the second day  
The radios failed; we turned the knobs; no answer.  
On the third day a warship passed us, heading north,  
Dead bodies piled on the deck. On the sixth day  
A plane plunged over us into the sea. Thereafter  
Nothing. The radios dumb;  
And still they stand in corners of our kitchens,  
And stand, perhaps, turned on, in a million rooms  
All over the world. But now if they should speak,  
If on a sudden they should speak again,  
If on the stroke of noon a voice should speak,  
We would not listen, we would not let it bring  
That old bad world that swallowed its children quick  
At one great gulp. We would not have it again.  
Sometimes we think of the nations lying asleep,  
Curled blindly in impenetrable sorrow,  
And then the thought confounds us with its strangeness.  
The tractors lie about our fields; at evening  
They look like dank sea-monsters couched and waiting.  
We leave them where they are and let them rust:  
'They'll moulder away and be like other loam.'  
We make our oxen drag our rusty plows,  
Long laid aside. We have gone back  
Far past our fathers' land.  
And then, that evening  
Late in the summer the strange horses came.  
We heard a distant tapping on the road,  
A deepening drumming; it stopped, went on again  
And at the corner changed to hollow thunder.  
We saw the heads  
Like a wild wave charging and were afraid.  
We had sold our horses in our fathers' time  
To buy new tractors. Now they were strange to us  
As fabulous steeds set on an ancient shield.

Or illustrations in a book of knights.  
We did not dare go near them. Yet they waited,  
Stubborn and shy, as if they had been sent  
By an old command to find our whereabouts  
And that long-lost archaic companionship.  
In the first moment we had never a thought  
That they were creatures to be owned and used.  
Among them were some half a dozen colts  
Dropped in some wilderness of the broken world,  
Yet new as if they had come from their own Eden.  
Since then they have pulled our ploughs and borne our loads  
But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.  
Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

The poem is very much inspired by Muir's Orkney childhood and pictures a sort of lost Eden from which a new "green" covenant between man and nature might surface. Horses, of course, are connected with the end of the world (the four horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelations – that ULTIMATE poetic vision of the end of the world – read it, if you have never done so – what a poem!) and here, symbolically, they represent not only the power and beauty of nature, but also mankind's most significant aid to the growth of our civilisation – for better or for worse. There is also an ironic mirroring of the seven days of Creation in the seven days of destruction.

More subtle, perhaps, are these next two poems, which in the past I have set pupils to compare, in the difficult Practical Criticism exercise (clearly designed to make pupils *hate* all poetry forever!) which is set in literature 18+ exams nowadays. "Try to see it more as a game," I tell pupils. "It's actually quite good fun!" Hmmm!? Well, *I* find it fun – and that's the main thing in teaching. Don't bore YOURSELF!

### **The End of the World**     by Archibald McLeish

Quite unexpectedly, as Vasserot  
The armless ambidextrian was lighting  
A match between his great and second toe  
And Ralph the lion was engaged in biting  
The neck of Madame Sossman while the drum  
Pointed, and Teeny was about to cough  
In waltz-time swinging Jocko by the thumb –  
Quite unexpectedly the top blew off:

And there, there overhead, there, there, hung over  
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,  
There in the starless dark, the poise, the hover,  
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,  
There in the sudden blackness the black pall  
Of nothing, nothing, nothing – nothing at all.

## End of the World

The world's end came as a small dot  
at the end of a sentence. Everyone died  
without ado, and nobody cried  
enough to show the measure of it.

God said: "I do not love you", quite  
quietly, but with a final note;  
it seemed the words caught in his throat,  
or else he stifled a yawn as the trite

phrase escaped his dust-enlivening lips.  
At least, there was no argument,  
no softening tact, no lover's cant,  
but sudden vacuum, total eclipse

of sense and meaning. The world had gone  
And everything on it, except the lives  
all of us had to live: the wives,  
children, clocks which ticked on,

unpaid bills, enormous power-blocks  
chock-full of arms demanding peace,  
and the prayerful in a state of grace  
pouncing on bread and wine like hawks.

by Tony Connors

It's quite a hard task for pupils – in 1h 20 mins to write a comparative essay. So, here is my attempt within the same time frame as I set them, minus the 20 minutes' reading and considering.

Both poems share a similar title and both poems have an unexpectedly jokey, ironic way of viewing the end of the world. The first builds up to a climax, which is defeated by the final words of "nothing...nothing at all", whereas the second presents us paradoxically with an ending where life *seems* to go on as usual. Both poems use irony to explore the idea of apocalypse for a modern world. Not least of the ironies, of course, is that though written in the *past* tense, the end of the world still has not arrived. Or has it?

The first poem seems to be set in a “circus” and the absurdity of the acts is highlighted in the first part of what is a very traditional and carefully crafted sonnet. An “armless ambidextrian” is a total nonsense, as is the idea of coughing in “waltz-time”. The “top” here is the circus “top” or tent, but it becomes a symbol of human life – a parading, absurd entertainment, which mixes danger and fun. “Ralph the lion” sounds friendly and harmless, but is “biting the neck of Madame Sossman” supposed to be serious or funny?

In the sestet which follows, the audience is given a more serious view (now that there is no “top”) of life and the universe. “The starless dark” already hints at the later “nothing”. Why are there no stars? Perhaps it plays on the idea of stardom in the entertainment world. Paradoxically a religious note creeps in with the “vast wings” and the “hover”, which hint at an angelic presence. The word “poise” also is very positive and suggests balance. All of these “positives”, however, are wiped out by the repeated word “nothing”, which might have started as a joke, but which ends on a grimmer note.

The poem suggests that beyond the false jollity and gaiety of life as “circus” excitement, the universe is cold, dark and contains “nothing” (unless the “wings” really are something – an angelic presence?). The bleakness of this message is offset somewhat by the formal crafting of the poem, for the poem itself is not “nothing”. Nevertheless, it cannot be said to present a message of hope to the “white faces, those dazed eyes”, who seem so powerless to react. The jokey tone is ultimately grim and suggests that life is a pointless façade, a show to stop us from thinking about our real place in the universe.

To some extent, the second poem similarly shares this jokey, darkly ironic tone. There is the same surprise element, though it comes earlier and is even more paradoxical. Compared with the “top” blowing off, here the end is quieter, almost insignificant and entirely natural: “a small dot at the end of a sentence”. The reason for the sombre tone that follows, however, comes with the phrase: “God said ‘I do not love you’”. Since the whole predication of a Christian God is that He *does* love us totally, whatever we have done, there is something very disturbing here. What has happened to cause “God” to go back on his very being? The poem refuses to say, as if it were obvious enough. “God” was bored (“stifled a yawn”) and so “Everyone died”. However, they *don’t* die (and neither, strangely, does the audience seem to die in the first poem either) because “the lives all of us had to live” continue (and the poet presumably includes himself or herself in this “us”). There is something deeply negative about the aspects of this “life”, reflecting as it does our materialistic, divisive and selfish lives.

There is terrible irony, finally, in the “power-blocks chock-full of arms demanding peace”. How can peace be “demanded” with weapons? The last phrase of the poem shows us the apparent hypocrisy of those who

think they have found a meaning of life in traditional religion. The irony is that those “in a state of grace” are “pouncing...like hawks” on the symbols of religion. The poem is therefore not just directed at modern atheism and materialism (“unpaid bills”), but also at organised religion. All of our lives run counter to the idea of “God”, with which the poem starts.

Compared to the first poem, it is a more telling and harder hitting poem, blaming our world for its lack of real “life”. “We” the people, are dead but we still live on. The one positive element perhaps is that the poet has chosen a traditional, rhymed and ordered ballad form to arrange these ideas. If the first poem describes an ambiguously pointless universe, the second poem shows us a world which might have had a point once, but for which we are to blame for having lost. Neither poem, however, seems to suggest that religion really offers a way out of this impasse.

So, life goes on and the world, luckily, keeps turning. We can certainly have too much these days with apocalypse – our cultural imaginations have never ceased to prefigure doomsday endings throughout the centuries. Climate change is forcing our world to consider natural as well as unnatural (nuclear) endings. Let’s stay positive and assume that the human race can avert these Mad Max, The Road, etc. scenarios. In the meantime, enjoy these poems in wonderful 2019!