

Boey Kim Cheng: Report to Wordsworth

Background

Boey Kim Cheng was born in Singapore in 1965. He now lives and works in Australia. This poem has echoes of several sonnets by Wordsworth. As the references are not merely cosmetic, but have real relevance to the themes of the poem, they need to be referred to as background. Three in particular are referred to in the next section. They are the sonnets 'London 1802'; 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' and most important of all, 'The world is too much with us . . .' It might be noted that, while Wordsworth used the Petrarchan (or Italian) form of the sonnet (like Keats – see 'On the Grasshopper and the Cricket') Boey prefers here to use the Shakespearian (or English) form with the final rhyming couplet.



Vocabulary and References

Line 1: the line starts with a direct echo of Wordsworth's
"Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee . . ."

The poet traces a direct line from himself to Wordsworth to Milton. The themes of Wordsworth's poem in which he regrets the passing of certain values are similar to Cheng's. Wordsworth's 'We are selfish men' is reflected in 'insatiate man moves in for the kill'.

Line 2: There are many echoes of 'The world is too much with us . . .' These notes do not intend to be exhaustive in exploring the references. Here Boey alters the context of Wordsworth's phrase, 'we lay waste our powers' to 'She [Nature] has been laid waste . . .'

Lines 5 to 10: The references to the sea-gods are explicable with reference to Wordsworth's sestet in the poem mentioned above:

'It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn:
Have sight of Proteus coming from the sea;
Or hear old Triton, blow his wreathed horn.'

However, Boey moves us out of mythology to contemporary reality with his image of the beached whale and man moving in for the kill.

Lines 7 to 8: Triton was the son of Poseidon. He stilled the waves by blowing trumpets in the shape of conch shells. As with the image of the whale above, Boey brings a twentieth-century reality to the mythology as he shows the effects of pollution.

Line 11: Wordsworth ends his poem about a rainbow, 'My heart leaps up . . .', with the words 'And I could wish my days to be Bound to each by natural piety.'

Line 12: again the poet pays homage to Wordsworth's poem 'On Westminster Bridge' while taking his

last line out of context.

Lines 13 to 14: It may be well not to close the poem down too much here as there are rich allusions to be explored. However, there is clearly a reference to the ozone layer in the wound widening in the sky which combines with the biblical echoes of the last line, perhaps in the Crucifixion account.

Questions

- Look at Wordsworth's sonnet 'The world is too much with us' to read. Read the first four lines and write down what you think Wordsworth is attacking in Man's behaviour.

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This sea, that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not--Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan, suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus, rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

This is an Italian sonnet. It also talks about the changing world and man's greed BUT it focuses more on man's materialism and his obsession with worldly goods as opposed to accepting the beauty of the world and living peacefully with nature. There is a clear parallel with Cheng's poem BUT the main difference is that Wordsworth still seems to be optimistic that man can correct his mistakes by getting closer to God or the Gods. Unfortunately, in Cheng's poem, even the Gods have been destroyed by man's actions; man's material greed has driven him to destroy nature so this poem is even more pessimistic.

- List some of the issues the environment that now preoccupy us, considering how far Wordsworth has identified the root causes of these. Check your list against the poem.

Air pollution: "Smothered by the smog"; contrast between nature and pollution – adds more intensity to the effects: water pollution (Gods); wiping out, endangering animal species; hole in the ozone layer: "wound widening in the sky"; beached whale – killing of whales; "entombed in the waste": metaphor to refer to animals/ humans dying or becoming entombed because of the waste at sea.

- Boey not only alludes to environmental problems in his poem, but also stirs the reader's feelings about them. Examine the first four lines of the poem and explore their imagery and sounds to see how he does this. Which images or words do you find particularly effective?

Perhaps he refers to God, perhaps to WW, perhaps to the readers – personification or nature, alliteration, sibilance, simile...apostrophe – appeal to the Gods...

You is effective – it points a finger and accuses; it evokes guilt.

"slowing like a dying clock" – the simile makes a link with time, as if the world, like man, is preparing to die; is nature no longer timeless as some of the other poems have suggested; THEME.

Note the form of the poem: QUATRAIN, SESTET, QUATRAIN.

- Read the next six lines and explore the way Boey has used the allusions to classical mythology that Wordsworth made. How does he add other dimensions to these allusions? Do you find his method successful?

In our opinion (2AVA), these allusions ARE successful because he's saying that even the strong / immortal forces of the Gods have been struck down/ destroyed by human actions. The use of words related to silence or the suppression of beautiful music (link between nature and music) and the use of metonymy make the poem seem far more convincing. Linking mythological Gods to contemporary environmental

problems gives them more impact. The reference to apostrophe is also appropriate:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostrophe_\(figure_of_speech\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostrophe_(figure_of_speech)): *Apostrophe* (Greek ἀποστροφή, *apostrophé*, "turning away"; the final *e* being sounded)^[1] is an exclamatory rhetorical figure of speech, when a speaker or writer breaks off and directs speech to an imaginary person or abstract quality or idea. In dramatic works and poetry written in or translated into English, such a figure of speech is often introduced by the exclamation "O". It is related to personification, although in apostrophe, objects or abstractions are implied to have certain human qualities (such as understanding) by the very fact that the speaker is addressing them as he would a person in his presence. This rhetorical device addresses things which are personified; absent people or gods. Apostrophe is often used to convey extreme emotion, as in Claudius's impassioned speech in *Hamlet*.^[2]

- Consider for a few moments the phrase 'poetry and piety'. What do the two words mean to them separately and together? Do you think the two words go together? You can refer also to Clarke's poem 'Lament' which ends with the lament to the 'ashes of language'. Are they saying similar things or are they different?

"Simon" – pantheism: link between poetry and nature and God.... Maybe he is saying that words (poems) or prayers (piety) are no longer enough to save us – we have to take some concrete ACTION. The link with 'Lament' is strong since they both refer to the destruction of language. Perhaps 'Lament' is referring to how the language of war (propaganda) is as worthless as the bombs that destroy nature whereas Cheng is suggesting that even the most eloquent and elaborate literary forms (poetry) or man's attempts to be closer to God (piety) are useless in trying to bring back the Gods.

- Consider the effect of the last two lines.

Rhyming couplet – makes the lines very closely associated, a unit in themselves; they widen the semantic field so that the poem no longer refers to the sea Gods but the Christian/ Jewish God that we always believe to be in the sky; also a more prosaic reference to the destruction of the ozone layer.

- Attempt a judgement: do you find the poem a clever game? Or is it powerful in its own right? Make up your own mind!

10. Write out for yourself some themes and those this poem shares with others from the anthology.

Descriptions of nature: *The Voice, Time, Amends, Full Moon and Little Frieda, On the Grasshopper and the Cricket, The Flower-Fed Buffaloes, First Love, Sonnet 29*

The present state of the world: *Dover Beach, Lament, The Flower-Fed Buffaloes*

Sonnets: *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket, Sonnet 43, Sonnet 29*

Going Further

http://www.google.com.hk/search?hl=en&biw=1280&bih=826&q=report%20to%20wordsworth&gbv=2&gs_sm=c&gs_upl=1125167491017077120120101810178128211211210&ie=UTF-8&tbo=u&tbm=vid&source=og&sa=N&tab=iv&ei=MPQpT_i4KsKfiQeQn4D5Dg

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_World_Is_Too_Much_with_Us

<http://englishlanguageliterature.wordpress.com/2011/02/17/report-to-wordsworth-by-boey-kim-cheng/>

Report to Wordsworth By Boey Kim Cheng

You should be here, Nature has need of you.

*She has been laid waste. Smothered by the smog, the flowers are mute
and the birds are few*

*in a sky slowing like a dying clock. All hopes of Proteus rising from the
sea have sunk; he is entombed in the waste we dump.*

*Triton's notes struggle to be free, his famous horns are choked his eyes
are dazed,*

*and Neptune lies helpless as a beached whale, while insatiate man
moves in for the kill.*

*Poetry and piety have begun to fail, as Nature's mighty heart is lying
still. O see the wound widening the sky, God is labouring to utter his
last cry.*

The author:



Boey Kim Cheng

Born in 1965, born in Singapore, and is an Australian poet. Other than that, not much about his life in relevance with this poem.

The poem itself is about Nature and how we humans treat it. It makes you think about how we deal with the environmental problems caused by us humans. The key themes are pollution and human greed.

It is called Report to Wordsworth because Wordsworth was a poet in earlier times who wrote about Nature. It seems as if Boey was writing a letter to him, showing him how much humans pollute and destroy our environment.

In the first line of the first stanza, Boey writes " You should be here" as if he were saying Wordsworth should have been able to see the mess we have made of our planet. It seems as if he were implying that if Wordsworth would have been there to notice it, something would be done about our situation, and that maybe he would write something about this too.

The second and third line have the lexical field of nature, for example: "the flowers", "the birds" and " the sky". From line five to the beginning of the seventh, the poet talks about how much waste we throw away at sea, by saying that Proteus (a shape-shifting, sea-god) is buried beneath all our trash. He also speaks about too other sea gods, including Neptune and Triton, by saying that Triton's notes, and Neptune, are trapped by the amount of waste in sea, waiting to be killed by the "insatiate man", which would mean the never satisfied, greedy human.

On line eleven, Boey also writes: " Poetry and piety have begun to fail" as if to say, that poetry and piety are not enough anymore, if we want to save our earth. Also the two last lines: " O see the wound widening in the sky, God is labouring to utter his last cry." By the wound widening in the sky I think he is talking about the hole in our Ozone, which keeps on widening with time, and maybe by "God is labouring to utter his last cry." He means our planet, and how God is making it try to speak out.

Boey conveys his message throughout his poem, by saying how he feels about all of this. By using the word insatiate to describe a man, and by using cultural references. I think he must have wrote this, to share how he personally feels about our earth, and to make us react and do something about it.

The mood of the poem seems to be more angry than anything, he seems to be complaining. Also, the poem creates an atmosphere of guilt, because we know by reading that we are the main cause of this, and that makes the reader ashamed.

It reminded me of a poem I had read from a girl, on how our sea had been destroyed by the waste of humans. I would have linked it, but it's in Italian. Other than that, I appreciated this poem , because I liked the message Boey is trying to present. He is convinced that our earth should be treated better by our people and I completely agree. I also

liked the fact that at first sight, the poem was good, but not better than anything I had ever read before, but then, by “exploding” it, I understood what the poet was trying to convey, and thought it was much more enjoyable.