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The Poetry of George Whipple: A Preliminary Exploration

by W. J. Keith

I came to know Barbara Pell only in the last decade of her life. We met on no more than five or six occasions, our friendship developing primarily through correspondence. It was cemented, however, by an incident I had long forgotten: a quarter of a century earlier, I had apparently given what turned out to be good advice while she was a graduate student, and henceforth she felt she owed me a deep debt of gratitude that, from my viewpoint, seemed unearned. Be that as it may, our literary interests converged through a mutual admiration for the novels and short stories of Hugh Hood. During the years in which I knew her, I also developed a friendship, wholly by means of correspondence, with the poet George Whipple. They lived close to each other, and would have found that they had much in common, but never met. When, therefore, I was asked to contribute to this memorial issue of Canadian Poetry, *it seemed appropriate to write an exploratory essay on Whipple's poetry and dedicate it to her.*

Introduction

Although George Whipple's poetry, at least until his most recent volumes, is not conspicuously autobiographical, some basic knowledge of the main events of his life is helpful in coming to a full understanding of what he writes. He was born in St. John, New Brunswick, in 1927, the son of a sales manager, but grew up and worked in Toronto until 1984, at which time he retired and moved to Burnaby, British Columbia, where he has lived ever since. Geographically, then, his life spans Canada "from sea to sea," a fact that is possibly coincidental but has certainly proved a boon to his work. So far as his basic beliefs and attitudes are concerned, he is on record as inheriting "a religious joy of life" from his mother, and "a lifelong love of religion" from his father (Martindale 7). He insists, however, that his "enjoyment of life has always depended on a harmony with nature" which he has felt "impelled to express in poems," and that, as far back as he can remember, he has known "epiphanies of eternity unfolding in time" (Stedingh 119). Clearly, he has devoted his whole life to his art, with the result that he never married, and has for many years been something of a recluse. Poetry has always been his first love, though he reports that he turned from

poetry to "the purer art of painting" for a year in the early 1960s. Although he soon returned to verse, his knowledge of painting is extensive, and most of his books (and, as his correspondents know, his letters) are enlivened by charming and witty drawings that display a remarkable "minimalist" skill. Above all, he asserts, "I certainly thank God for everything He has helped me to write," and then, in a phrase reminiscent of William Blake's "tho' I call them mine, I know that they are not Mine" (33), he adds: "I do not write alone" (Stedingh 126).

When Whipple published his first volume of poems, *Life Cycle*, in 1984, Michael Williams, writing in *Canadian Book Review Annual*, concluded a perceptive review as follows: "I hope Mr Whipple still has something to say in future collections, because this collection is so comprehensive and mature" (259). He need not have worried. Since then, no less than eleven further volumes have appeared over twenty-five years, and another has been published since this article was written. But this pattern of publication has led to certain assumptions about his career as a poet that do not survive closer inspection, and it is necessary to correct these before proceeding to a more detailed examination of his achievement.

Life Cycle appeared when Whipple was fifty-seven years of age, thus encouraging the impression that he was a classic example of a late developer albeit one who, once established, has continued to write with extraordinary speed (and maintained a remarkably high standard of performance) into his eighties. However, *Life Cycle* was no ordinary poetic debut. Long in the making, it amounted to 161 pages containing 99 poems, and might better be described as a "Selected Poems" and is, in fact, so described (though inconspicuously) on the title-page. Indeed, he records "prattling" his first poem when he was "four or five" (Stedingh 119) and had first appeared in print in *Poets 56 – The Younger English Canadians*, an anthology compiled by Raymond Souster for Contact Press as early as 1956. There he joined seven other poets including Daryl Hine, Jay Macpherson, and Peter Dale Scott. He contributed five poems, of which only "Bird," totally rewritten and preserving no more than occasional phrases from its 1984 manifestation (LC 76),[1] has ever appeared since. Curiously enough, given his later distinction as a writer with strong attachments to earlier traditions, he was easily the most avant-garde of the youthful contributors. His poems at that time were conspicuous for fragmented syntax, dense allusion (explanatory notes were needed), and—at least for Canadian verse—unconventional layout on the page. They gave little or no indication of his subsequent development.

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He was clearly not anxious to commit himself to book publication until he had undergone a lengthy apprenticeship in which he honed his technical skills. Although we cannot be sure precisely when most of the poems in his first book were written, at least some of them had achieved print in poetry-magazines years before—"Maeonides" (LC 98) as early as 1960 and eight or so others in the 1970s. As a young poet, then, he seems to have exercised remarkable self-restraint. Barry Dempster was perhaps the only reviewer to point out that *Life Cycle* included "over thirty years' worth of poems" (7), thus recognizing that he was already an experienced and mature writer.

None the less, his apprenticeship was by no means over. Further literary experience led to the vast majority of these poems (all but four of them) not only reprinted, sometimes more than once, in subsequent books, but reappearing in heavily revised versions. Moreover, close to a quarter of the work published after *Life Cycle* has received similar treatment. Whipple is constantly reconsidering, tinkering with and refining his earlier writings, as if intent upon establishing a personal canon in as perfect a state as possible. All this means that his total published output is not quite as voluminous as a simple counting of titles in all his books might suggest. It is still remarkable, but at the time of writing (early 2010) belongs in the 600s rather than the 800s.

But it also means that his search for perfection can be traced through a close examination of these revisions, and the results of such an exercise are revealing. In the majority of cases, a poem is shortened, often drastically. Inessential details and flourishes are ruthlessly expunged. For example, "Li Po" (LC 87, PK 50), the most dramatic instance, contained 57 lines when it first appeared. Twenty-two years later, when reprinted, it had been reduced to 14, giving the appearance of a highly irregular, unrhymed sonnet. Indeed, there is a continuing tendency for long and somewhat rambling poems to be not merely cut down in size but also reconstructed in regular stanza-forms. Thus "From the Japanese" (LC 36, FW 27) appears first as a four-stanza poem of 7, 6, 4, and 5 lines respectively. When reprinted, it is trimmed down to three 3-line stanzas—and although individual lines are still irregular in terms of syllable-count, the poem *looks* regular, and gains an added dignity thanks to its more formal patterning. Similarly, "Siesta" (LC 33, O 47, CM 48) was at first a 3-stanza poem of 5, 12, and 8 lines with only sporadic rhyme, the lines mainly pentameter but varying in syllable-length from eight to twelve. In its reprinted form, it gives the appearance on the page of a Shakespearean sonnet, though it is not in fact rhymed. Even when revisions involve merely the substitution of

a more appropriate or striking word, these and other poems gain remarkably in both coherence and clarity.

Early Poems

In the interview given in the *Antigonish Review*, Whipple remarked that "three things frighten the post-modern editor—religion, rhetoric and rhyme" (Stedingh 120). These are all important to Whipple himself; indeed, they constitute his more conspicuous qualities as a poet, and will continually be referred to in the discussions to follow. But rhyme need not be discussed in particular detail since it is easily recognizable and its effect comparatively obvious. He rarely employs it with total regularity but prefers to introduce it only when a chiming effect is locally desirable. Moreover, his rhyme-words are as likely to occur in the middle as at the end of any given line. He is also fond of approximate rhymes ("off-rhymes") that create an effect close to a form of dissonance. Rhyme is useful but neither a habitual nor necessary part of his poetic equipment, significant mainly because of its unwise neglect by so many of his contemporaries.

"Meridians" (LC 1, FW 31, CM 95), the first poem in his first book, may not be the most impressive he has ever written, but it was deliberately placed to create an immediate impact. Its opening lines read as follows:

> Surnames draw their lots,
> Prepared for quick departures:
> Twitching seaweed from blind ocean tombs
> The dead go swimming for live throbbing cribs,
> The silken soft interior warm lotus-
> Smooth round windowless pink holding-rooms
> Where souls are barrel-staved with ribs,
> Re-robed with flesh and fitted with spare hearts.
> (1)

The poem continues for another nine lines, but when he came to republish it, he characteristically cancelled them. Moreover, apart from (*un*characteristically) repositioning a later clause after the first two lines ("wave-buried in their fathers' wake"), changing "Re-robed" to "red-robed," and following modern practice by dropping the initial capitals, the lines reappear unaltered.

Rhetoric is certainly prominent here: the captivating mysteriousness of the opening line; the bewildering paradox of dead swimmers and the unlikely association of cribs with tombs and even "ocean tombs"; the puzzling assemblage of numerous adjectives governing the unexpected "holding-rooms,"

followed by the bizarre concept of "barrel-staved" souls; and the courageous pun by means of which "spare hearts" (an equally bizarre juxtaposition) disturbingly suggests spare *parts*. As readers we are bombarded by evocative yet apparently mixed metaphors, and his bold variety of imagery and metaphor quickly establishes itself as a hallmark of Whipple's style.

But the challenging—even esoteric—situation offered in these lines (a "myth" in the Platonic sense) itself establishes a larger framework for the "life cycle" that gives its title to Whipple's volume. More than that, it elaborates on the overall pattern of his whole *oeuvre*, which he has described as "the life cycle of us all" in that it "allows room for every human experience" (Stedingh 122). Here it revives the world-view presented in Plato's *Phaedo*, and reproduced imaginatively in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." Whipple, be it noted, has a poem entitled "Intimations of Mortality" in *Hats Off to the Sun* (85, CM 111), and the Wordsworthian emphasis may well help to explain the preoccupation with childhood memories; another of his titles is "Remembrance of Times Past" (LC 152, O 15, CM 27), a theme conspicuous throughout Whipple's work. In "Meridians," souls drawing lots within the land of the dead are summoned to rebirth within our world, live out their lives on earth, and then presumably return (in words omitted from the later reprinting) to "Green Paradise" (LC 1). Of course, their sea-journey, equatable at one level with the child's development in the womb, can be related to Wordsworth's resonant image of the children who "sport upon the shore" and "the mighty waters rolling ever more" ("Ode," ll.170-71), and at this point we may come to appreciate the aptness of a later volume-title, *Swim Class*. Such are the wider interrelationships possible within Whipple's own world-view, which embraces Christianity yet is in no way rigidly confined to its tenets.

By this stage, rhetoric has become inextricably merged with the first of Whipple's three Rs: religion. The part played by Christianity in his poetic world-view becomes central in "First Communion" (LC 2, TT 10), the poem which follows "Maeonides" in *Life Cycle* and which, when reprinted, appropriately opens *Tom Thomson and Other Poems*. In this case, we are positively bombarded by Christian vocabulary, often employed vividly but unconventionally in imaginative form: "prelate smiles," "apostolic stones," "sacerdotal leaves," etc. In his later poems the Platonic myth is covertly fused with Christian belief through the somewhat unorthodox concept of rebirth, Whipple's punning instincts unabashedly hinting at various possible implications of the term, including (re)incarnation. Thus a poem entitled "Rebirth" (PE 67), where the imagery of air-

travel ("hangar of the mind," "radar screen," "headphones humming," "parachutes to heaven") is exuberantly, even extravagantly suggestive, of the style of Dylan Thomas. (Whipple, by the way, refers to Thomas's great elegy for his father, "Do Not Go Gently into That Good Night," in the Stedingh interview 120). Indeed, the famous last sentence of the note to Thomas's *Collected Poems* might well have been penned by Whipple if Thomas had not written it first: "These poems…are written for the love of Man and in praise of God and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't" (vii).

These metaphor-packed poems are remarkable for their success in distilling the essence of a place or creature or atmosphere. They can delight with their heady verbal play, as in "puffed with adders" from "The Primal Swamp" (LC 17, TT 17), their memorable lines such as "You wag the world behind you with such ease" from "Pooch" (LC 40, O 23, CM 32), or the elaborate and even Joyce-like diction represented by "Pollenebriate" and "dilatory dilettante of odours" in "September Song" (LC 42, O 22, CM 31). But such rich ingredients can eventually become indigestible. It is not coincidental that Whipple in his later revisions curbed the more exuberant imagery and occasional mixed metaphors, cutting down what threatened to become a jungle-like excess.

Moreover, there came a time when he discovered the effectiveness of interspersing such poems with others that displayed a deliberate *limitation* of metaphor. "The Voice of Silence" (LC 71, TT 40) is a convenient instance. The opening stanza reads as follows:

> For those ashamed of being human
> the simple rituals of nature
> (the rustle of the rain,
> a salmon-leap of wind
> that wrinkles clouds on water)
> are like a charm to summon
> from the mind's thesaurus
> the distant deer bells of a poem
> stepping shyly through the darkness
> to find its only writer.

The "simple rituals of nature" have always fascinated him, and if "rituals" is a restrained figure of speech, and "salmon-leap of wind" a notable (though apt) image, it isn't until we encounter "the mind's thesaurus" that we register the shock of an unexpected, full-blown, arresting metaphor—one which alerts us to the direction in which the poem ultimately moves and ushers in the delicate image of the nocturnal deer. This is also a signif-

icant poem within the canon of Whipple's work because it represents an initial gesture in the direction of a surprising number of poems, especially in the later volumes, which take poetry as their favoured subject.

"The Voice of Silence" is a crucial poem in Whipple's canon for many reasons. In addition to exemplifying how to subdue his youthful passion for metaphor, it touches on so many of his major preoccupations—art, nature, and even, I would add, religious faith, since it ends with the phrase "footsteps on the water" (anticipating a later book-title) which evokes the image of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6:45-50). Moreover, being only thirty lines in length, just fitting a page, it also illustrates the increased emphasis in his later work on short poems. There are, for example, no poems in *Kites* (2007) and *Swim Class* (2008) that require page-turning and the same is true of his latest completed volume, *The Seven Wonders of the Leg* (2010), which appeared after this article was completed. As a result, "The Voice of Silence" can be regarded as a significant transitional poem.

For another important transitional poem, we may turn to "Speaking in Tongues" (FW 64). The opening stanza begins in his early manner:

> The grandiloquence
> of mountains; the rhetoric
> of rivers. The hortatory shout
> of waterfalls…

The self-consciousness of this "rhetoric" as well as the unexpected "hortatory," the perfect word to draw attention to Whipple's style, are alike "grandiloquent." But the poem continues, and concludes:

> And in an autumn field, a whisper:
> *The barren stalk is beautiful*
> *as the ripe ear of corn is beautiful:*
> *both nod in affirmation of the wind.*

The simplicity of diction here is accompanied by an increased profundity of thought; precision ("the barren stalk") replaces verbal display. Moreover, the final line (where the single unusual word "affirmation" is fully justified by its exactitude and contextual rightness) clinches the poem by explaining the title, with its suggestion of Pentecost (Acts 2)—the wind as breath and spirit.

Later Poetry

When we turn to Whipple's later poetry, it is necessary that we should reconsider and adapt our literary-critical procedures. These poems, besides being shorter, inevitably give the initial impression of being less ambitious and less substantial poems than many of their predecessors, but this does not mean that they are necessarily inferior in effect. What matters most is the consistent verbal and rhythmic quality in each poem. Moreover, one finds through experience that a lot is missed by reading too many at a single sitting (though this is exactly what their brevity encourages). After all, the effort of concentration required of readers to recognize and appreciate the minute details of a tightly-written poem tends to wane quickly. It is all too easy to underrate an individual Whipple poem if it is encountered at the end of a long reading-session. Each needs to be savoured separately and deserves our full and fresh attention.

At the same time, by concentrating on shorter—often extremely short— poems, Whipple has to learn new skills. A new phase of apprenticeship begins, and the results are more visible since he was publishing more quickly and so the unsuccessful experiments are preserved and far more readily accessible. I shall be commenting on the excellences of the later volumes as soon as possible, but one has to concede, I think, that a number of these short poems do not fully convince. For instance, although he had already mastered the discipline of cutting the unnecessary, of making the form more concise, he took longer to learn the art (exemplified in "The Voice of Silence") of providing a conclusion that, while avoiding anticlimax, was both unexpected and convincing without becoming unduly flashy.

Other problems also need to be solved. Thus, he has stated that "Poetry should not attempt to say what can better be said as an essay, play, story, or sermon" (Stedingh 121), but he does not always heed his own warning. He occasionally produces what I call "statement poems" in which he expresses a message directly with little or no elaboration. "Struck to my Knees" (*Swim Class* 68) is a convenient instance, here quoted in full:

> Struck to my knees
> in all-night agonizing prayer,
> my hot anger ends
> by waging brave forgiveness where
> fierce humility, courageous peace
> make my worst enemies my friends.

The insight is admirable, and a curious behavioural paradox has been shrewdly identified, yet, apart from the oxymoronic tension in the penultimate line and the originality of "waging…forgiveness," the language is unremarkable; the poem, *as poem*, fails to arouse excitement.

Then there are poems that begin with a natural image often quite promisingly evoked, but then change direction to contain an implied allegorical meaning or moral. A convenient example is "Watercolour" (PE 51), especially significant because we can trace Whipple's process of discovering what is wrong and correcting it. The first published version begins with an effective description of rain on office-blocks, followed by a cloudless period after which "The city steams a smell of caves…" But the last stanza reads:

> From streets molasses-black with rain
> the washed conglimmerations rise
> —as you and I perhaps may rise
> at the last trump.

"Molasses-black" is excellent and "conglimmerations" another of his Joyce-like portmanteau-words, but the final two lines are not prepared for and come as a let-down rather than a surprise. We detect, surely, the whiff of a sermon-formula.

There comes a point, however, when Whipple acknowledges the difficulty. He omits the last two lines and finishes, using an image that had previously appeared in the middle of the poem by which the "conglimmerations" are presented in the reprinted version as "a rainbow airbrushed on the air" (TT 97). The after-shower light projects a transfigured city-vision on to the (heavenly) air, but by this time Whipple no more needs to invoke the heavens than the now-suppressed, conventional "last trump." The religious allusion emerges as created vision rather than conventional stock-response, all the more effective by being understated. The title, "Watercolour," points towards art (of the Blakean variety) rather than the stale cliché-repetition of 1 Corinthians 15:52.

Whipple is, quintessentially, a religious writer. But that is a phrase that combines many meanings within itself. The most distinctive form that his religious concerns take is a remarkable capacity to find interesting everything in what he would not hesitate to call God's creation. And the corollary of this is that everything, however trivial, can potentially become the subject of a celebratory poem. This feature of his work can, I suggest, be an extraordinary asset yet can also prove a serious liability. On the one hand it enables him to write, in the words Richard Wilbur has revitalized,

about "the things of this world" with an insight and understanding that is invigorating. But for readers who do not share his enthusiasm for all aspects of our trivia-ridden modern age, a number of the later poems will make no impact. I would not wish to argue that there are subjects (and objects) that are unredeemable, but the ability to redeem all of them in poetry may well lie beyond even Whipple's exceptional abilities. That said, we may proceed to celebrate the best of his own celebrations in the later poems, which Jeffery Donaldson, reviewing *Origins*, welcomes as "a sheer delight…lustily worrisome, edgy," with diction that is both "inventive" and "colourful" (213). How many can be classified among the best is, of course, an open question. Fortunately, however, space considerations allow me to confine myself to those I personally judge to be *la crème de la crème*, the best of the best.

"Before the World was Made," the opening poem in *Swim Class* (10), is worth emphasizing as an exquisite miniature revisiting Whipple's favourite "life cycle" theme. It begins, in sublime simplicity:

> Before the world
> was made
> I was made,
> by-product of
> my parents'
> blest collision…

And it ends with his being privileged to see, in spirit,

> what goes on
> behind the seen.

Remembering the phrase "spare hearts" as an implied pun on "spare parts" in "Meridians," we can recognize the final phrase as a clinching conclusion that raises the level of argument from the material (the expected "behind the scene") to the visionary, an insight concerning an otherwise unknowable world beyond the senses.

Two poems later (SC 12), "A Short History of Mankind," about "kids" at recess, seems at first to operate on the level of soccer, bullies, and schoolyard fights, and so to run the risk of staying within the limits of the trivial. Yet it ends by stepping back and seeing the subject *sub specie aeternitatis*, recognizing not only "the whole history of mankind" but

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all
its ancient future
in those jeans.

A preposterous pun, of course, the kind at which we have all been taught to groan, but might we not remember Jesus' serious pun about Peter—Greek *petros* (stone)—as the rock upon which to build his church (Matthew 16:18)? Moreover, Whipple's is a pun that reminds us of genetic/generative continuities, the oxymoronic "ancient future" collapsing time into a state of eternity.

Another two poems later (SC 14), we encounter the title that gives its name to the volume. At first, we respond to it as an admirable mood-piece vividly evoking children again at play, but this time in a swimming pool, the scene expressed in terms of all the senses—not only visual and aural (the teacher's "whistle") but including smell ("chlorine"), touch ("heel-gripping"), feeling ("goose-pimple-cold")—even to the extent of a bold sensuality ("hugged by lewd water / chucking their chins, / squeezing their thighs"). "Carnal," yes, but without any reduction into a Freudian over-sexuality. In addition (and here the level of poetic argument is raised yet again), we should notice the emphasis on the idea of journey and the eventual return

back
to strange lockers, books,
their alien clothes.

Once again, as in "Meridians," we are reminded of Wordsworth's children who "sport" (Whipple includes the word "disporting") on the shore of a greater cosmic reality.

Word-play is always important and usually conspicuous when Whipple is writing at his best. It can take many forms, often celebrating the divine gift of language. In "Garden Whispers" (PK 36, CM 112), he writes:

I palaver with the willows,
speak the language of the laurel,
bend an attentive ear
to the yellow badinage
of buttercups, the shy
blue stutter of the aster.

Here, "palaver" derives etymologically from roots meaning "word" and "speech," while "language of the laurel" is justified by the fact that in the Classical world laurel was sacred to poetry and prophecy. Although "badinage" would seem to be associated with buttercups for strictly alliterative reasons, just as "stutter" is linked to "aster" by courtesy of sound and rhythmic pattern, the technical skill is enough to render the effect wholly successful. The second verse of the poem, however, develops in a different direction when red poppies suggest John McCrae, Flanders fields, and Canada's "first green / shoots of self-awareness…" More generally, all Whipple's garden poems (and there are many of them) ultimately hark back to the miracle of vegetable growth, and to the Garden of Eden where living things were first given names and so were themselves received into language.

In "The Jimmy" (K 65), Whipple begins on the level of humour and whimsy ("As moonstruck calves / believe God is a cow") but then effortlessly changes poetic gears to comment on our capacity for examining the world in which we find ourselves; thanks to scientific achievements, "we can explain / the where and when" but not, significantly, "the why." At that point, of course, "the jimmy, faith" is introduced, and the poem might be considered in danger of lapsing all too easily into sermon-like religious allegory. But here Whipple's verbal dexterity comes to his aid:

> The jimmy, faith,
> alone can pry
> the window of shut
> heaven up and show the why
> behind the what.

There is a George-Herbert-like efficiency behind this. The ideas of God as a cow and faith as a jimmy may be regarded as "heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together," in Samuel Johnson's words (348); indeed, we might challenge the strict logic of the initial "As," but Whipple is not offering a philosophical argument; rather, he is insisting, albeit under the guise of playfulness, upon the limitations of a science that lacks the divine (Blake-like) imagination. The skilful juggling of how, when, why, and what involves expert play of another sort. Moreover, this poem from *Kites* (2007) takes on a new subtlety when, in the context of the later *Swim Class* (2008), we read "behind the what" in connection with "behind the seen."

Whipple's religious concerns are never solemn, and the strength of his faith enables him to extend his work to reach out to the furthest boundaries of the playful and the apparently (but only apparently) non-serious. In con-

clusion, I would like to illustrate his capacity to surprise by means of the totally unexpected and even the outrageous by drawing attention to one of my favourites among his later poems, "Van Gogh's Ear" (SC 54). The subject is an extreme and potentially tragic episode in the life of a major artist whom the poet obviously admires greatly; he is described as "deranged" but "God-obsessed" in the immediately succeeding poem, "*The Potato Eaters*." Whipple begins by treating the subject clinically, but with more than a hint of the absurd:

> Carefully washed,
> tucked in an envelope,
> van Gogh gave his famous ear
> to the only love he could afford,
> some poor demirep who whored
> in the little sun-baked town of Arles.

The careful washing, the placing in the envelope, even the description of the ear as "famous" (implying a drastic temporal shift), ought to be painful, even horrifying; incongruously, moreover, the passage contains a dangerous suggestion of grotesque black comedy. Yet isn't this precisely how we might respond to the episode if our sense of the proper, and a determination not to exhibit "bad taste," did not enforce a solemn reaction? (Dare I draw attention at this point to the numerous London-Cockney jokes stemming from the phrase "What's this 'ere?")

The reference to "the only love he could afford" arouses sympathy and even a tempting towards sentimentality but then we encounter the shocking yet brilliant final lines: first, "Did she keep that strange memento of their quarrel?" A disturbing thought in itself, but then:

> Does someone bark in Sotheby's, *What do I hear*
> *for this formaldehyde-preserved great artist's ear?*

Another drastic temporal shift, the return of the clinical ("*formaldehyde*") with a vengeance; and at last, after we have registered the preposterousness of this idea, the shocked realization that we have encountered a devastating comment on the commercialization of art. Only a poet of extraordinary ability could communicate such a vast range of emotions within the compass of nine lines.

I began by suggesting that Whipple's poetry, "at least until his most recent volumes, is not conspicuously autobiographical." Certainly, among the charms of the late, shorter writings are the vignettes they provide about

details of the poet's life—his likes and (less often) his dislikes, his hopes, his beliefs, the satisfactions of a life lived as closely as possible to the terms of his moral conscience and, especially, his artistic vision. Without ever presenting himself as an ideal, he offers hints of what is attainable, and shows how some of his most personal thoughts and experiences can clarify the opportunities and challenges of the human journey. One poem in particular, "Less Popular Than Plays" (K 53), seems to me an admirable, crystal-clear, and characteristic account of what he has attempted and achieved in his chosen artistic medium:

> Less popular
> than plays,
> more eloquent
> than sermons,
> above the noise
> of shouting time
> my poems raise
> a gentle voice
> as I slowly climb
> the stairway
> of my days.

A gentle voice indeed, but I hope to have shown that it is a remarkably assured and endearing one that can serve as both a model and an inspiration for poets of the future.

Notes

1 Abbreviations for citations of Whipple's poems are listed in the "Works Cited."

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