

THE ANTIDOTE—CLASSIC POETRY FOR MODERN LIFE

A Reading of 'The Arrow and the Song'
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

By CHRISTOPHER NIELD

The Arrow and the Song

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For, so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For who has sight so keen and strong,
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long, long afterward, in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroke;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.

We can never predict the power of our actions. The word said, the deed done, disappear into the past, but often, years later, we can be astounded to learn of their impact. A friend explodes with rage over an imagined slight; a stranger thanks us for a favor we'd forgotten.

In this poem, Longfellow compares two forms of action, represented by an arrow and a song. The speaker shoots an arrow into the air and it falls to earth, out of sight. What could it symbolize?

As a weapon, with the capacity to cut and kill, it could represent our destructive emotions and behavior. We say a bad word, we spread a rumor, we lie. Our hatred may fly out of sight, but who's to say there's no lasting damage?

In the second stanza, the speaker breathes a song "into the air." A song suggests something carefree and benign. Formless and free, it is the opposite of the arrow, but its destination is similarly unknown.

Does it represent our efforts to celebrate life rather than to damn it? To look for the good in people rather



LIZA VORONIN/THE EPOCH TIMES

than to condemn them for their flaws? But if we do someone a good turn, is our virtue ever rewarded?

There may be other ways of looking at the arrow and the song, however. After all, the arrow has positive, even heroic connotations of strength of will, resolve, and purpose. (Robin Hood comes irresistibly to mind.)

If the arrow represents the realm of physical action, then the song

may, by way of contrast, represent the realm of poetry and art. Falling to earth, falling on deaf ears, it seems horribly ineffectual. (Anyone who's ever given a poetry reading knows the feeling well.)

The question posed at the end of the second stanza creates a pause as we ponder it. When the poem resumes, the scene and the tone have subtly changed. The repetition and the three strong stresses in

the phrase "long, long, afterward," make us feel the heaviness of the speaker's aging body. We hear the rueful voice of an older, wiser man.

We associate old age with sagacity, a pragmatic perspective that sees things more clearly than thrusting youth; and, at this point, the speaker finally discovers the path of the arrow and the song. It's as if he discovers the path of his own life, and a hidden aspect of life itself.

If we interpret the arrow as a symbol of our negative actions, then its unbroken shaft slicing into the oak may indicate that the hatred of the past remains as sharp as ever.

The damage is done, and cannot be undone. But the song has grown within the heart of a friend. The sharing of simple joy has flourished. Significantly the song, like the arrow, exists unbroke.

It is known from beginning to end. This touches on the role of memory in the transmission of poetry; and, indeed, what is the literary canon other than what people have chosen to remember?

In a sense, this poem is about karma. It is a lesson to be aware of our moral choices and their consequences, because on some level they are always present, waiting to be discovered. It is also about the difference between our practical efforts to make a mark on the world, which often come to naught, and the peculiar power of art to shape reality in slow time.

As the final phrase suggests, art can create friendship among perfect strangers: it provides us with a common language through which we can come to know each other in our most distinctive selves.

Take this column. Having been plucked from an anthology, the poem now lands on the page of the newspaper and the Web site, to breathe into the mind of each reader. Yet who are you? I have no idea. Yet if we were to meet, Longfellow's poem would exist as our point of contact, our introduction and our bond.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) was an American poet most famous for "The Song of Hiawatha."

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9. The Shack by William P. Young

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Losing the Wonder of Literature

Standardized tests
killjoy of books:
U.K. laureate

LONDON (Reuters)—An uninspiring regime of testing and targets in primary schools is damaging education and turning a generation of children off, Britain's laureate for children told Reuters.

Michael Rosen is an enthusiastic exponent of reading to children of all ages, but the laureate said the British government's obsession with measuring educational success using standardized tests known as SATs and league tables for schools has left little room for meaningful engagement with books.

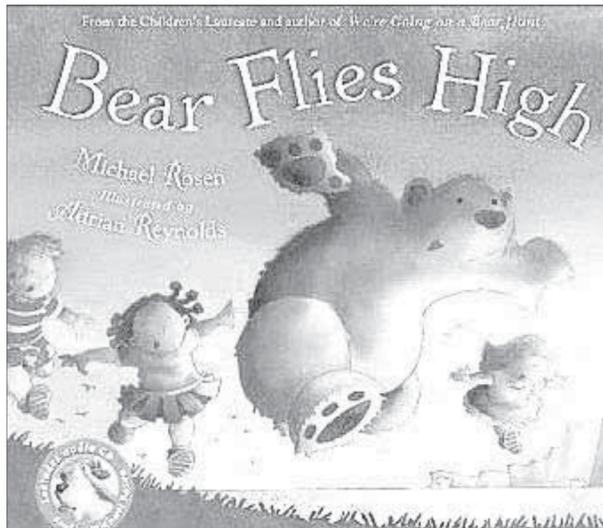
"What's happened since they invented SATs...is they've taken literature out of the curriculum and in its place put worksheets which don't look at whole books, they just look at passages," Rosen said.

SATs are tests, based on a government-approved national curriculum, taken by 7 and 11 year olds in Britain. They are used to help calculate a school's performance and its ranking in published league tables.

Speaking over lunch at a cafe near London's South Bank after recording a literature program for BBC radio at the recreated Shakespeare's Globe theater, Rosen said SATs tests have sharply narrowed horizons in the classroom.

"It has been disastrous because instead of kids finding out why books are fun and enjoyable and interesting, instead they've just had these little slabs of text thrown at them, and the questions are the most boring, irrelevant questions."

SATs for 14-year olds were scrapped last year and Rosen thinks that a threat from Britain's



TURN OFF: Michael Rosen, the U.K.'s laureate for children, bemoans the overuse of standardized tests because they lessen interest in reading. His latest book, "Bears Fly High," is set for release in Oct. 2009.

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teaching unions to refuse to administer the tests, may succeed in putting the final nail in the coffin of the whole system.

Rosen said the government believes that it can measure the outcome of every learning experience.

"The whole point about literature is that it doesn't have learning outcomes. It has feelings, it has weightings-up, it has wonderings. This is why it's so important and powerful, and they haven't clocked it," he said.

Hectic Schedule

Rosen, a hugely engaging and hilarious performer of poetry, who has written or edited well over 100

books, has had an even more hectic schedule than usual during his two-year stint as laureate, which ends next month.

As laureate he has performed in front of well over 34,000 children and more than 8,500 teachers, librarians, and student teachers, the Booktrust charity has calculated.

In between touring schools, broadcasting for the BBC, and lecturing at London's Birkbeck University, Rosen has also been busy writing.

Soon due for release are "Bear Flies High," an anthology entitled "The A-Z of Poetry" and a fiction book called "I'm Number One" about a bullying robot. He is also

working on a YouTube-style poetry website for schools.

Then there's an exhibition at the British Library entitled "Twinkle Twinkle Little Bat!" celebrating 400 years of poetry for children running until June 28, which Rosen curated. There is also the Roald Dahl funny prize established to recognize the best humorous books for children.

Having young children, an eight-year old daughter and four-year old son (as well as three older children and two step children), has provided Rosen with plenty of material for new books and poems. Mother's Milk

It was the work of Rosen's parents as high-profile education reformers in the 1960-70s that helped foster a love of poetry and fiction.

"There were concepts to do with learning through talk and discussion, discovery and investigation that I got almost literally with my mother's milk," he said.

But it was their roots in the Jewish east end of London that Rosen ascribes to his family's literary talents.

Both came from very poor Jewish backgrounds in the east end working in the garment and boot trade.

He said an upbringing steeped in east European and then east end London's Jewish life was immensely rich in linguistic diversity and cultural engagement.

"Being taken to the Yiddish speaking theater. All that is so linguistically powerful," Rosen said.

"You've got a different script, a different language, another mother tongue from the country of origin, might be Polish, might be Russian, so you've got all this stuff going on."

Michael Rosen's latest children's book, "Bears Fly High," by Bloomsbury Publishing PLC is set for release in Oct. 2009.

Balanchine at the Met

By KREMENA KRUMOVA
Epoch Times Staff

Almost 70 years after first directing ballet at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, George Balanchine, one of the most celebrated choreographers of all times, will be celebrated again on the Opera House stage through the American Ballet Theatre's "Balanchine-Tchaikovsky Spectacular."

Balanchine's "Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux," "Allegro Brillante," "Mozartiana," and "Theme and Variations," will be performed by the American Ballet Theatre May 19-25.

American Ballet Theatre (ABT), one of the most beloved dance companies in the world, has been considered a "living national treasure" since its founding in 1940. Every year ABT tours the country and overseas, performing before 600,000 people. The ensemble, consisting of first-class solo and principal dancers, has appeared in 126 cities in 42 countries across four continents.

Among the solo performers are Stella Abrera, a gold medalist at the Royal Academy of Dancing's Adeline Genée Awards in London in 1995; Yuriko Kajiji, who will appear in "Theme and Variations" on May 21 and 23; Carlos Lopez, recipient of the silver medal at the Seventh International Dance Competition in Paris; and Gennadi Saveliev, who in 1996 was silver medalist at the 1996 New York International Ballet Competition and finalist at the Nagoya Ballet Competition in 1999.

Artistic Director Kevin McKenzie took the reigns in October 1992; he was formerly an American Ballet Theatre principal dancer. He is known for enriching ABT's repertoire and for taking the ensemble to the most prestigious stages in the world. Pushing dancing excellence

to new levels, McKenzie, along with ABT's principal dancers, continues to fascinate audiences.

ABT principals include Nina Ananiashvili, who was appointed Artistic Director of the State Ballet of Georgia in September 2004; Maxim Beloserkovsky, who was trained in the Ukraine and who will dance in "Mozartiana" and "Allegro Brillante" during the forthcoming events at the Metropolitan Opera; Roberto Bolle, a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF who has danced in Royal Albert Hall in London; Cuban dancer Jose Manuel Carreño, a recipient of the gold medal at the New York International Ballet Competition in 1987 and the Grand Prix at the International Ballet Competition in Jackson, Miss., in 1990; Spanish dancer Angel Corella, who will appear in the "Pas de Deux" performance; Herman Cornejo, a multiple award winner in numerous prestigious competitions in South America; and Irina Dvorovenko, winner of the gold medal and the Anna Pavlova Prize at the International Ballet Competition in Moscow in 1992, a silver medalist at the Jackson International Ballet Competition in 1990, and a bronze medalist at the International Ballet Competition in Osaka, Japan, in 1991.

George Balanchine

George Balanchine was born in 1904 in St. Petersburg, Russia, into the Georgian family of a composer and ballet lover. He is recognized as one of the 20th century's most distinguished choreographers, and an initiator of the ballet industry in the United States, being also co-founder and ballet master of New York City Ballet. Balanchine has created more than 200 dance works, staging grand opera productions like the "Nutcracker," "La Sonnambula," "Swan Lake," and "Shéhérazade."

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