

5-19-05

Dear Oisin,

The following is probably Lord Byron's best known poem.

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impair'd the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

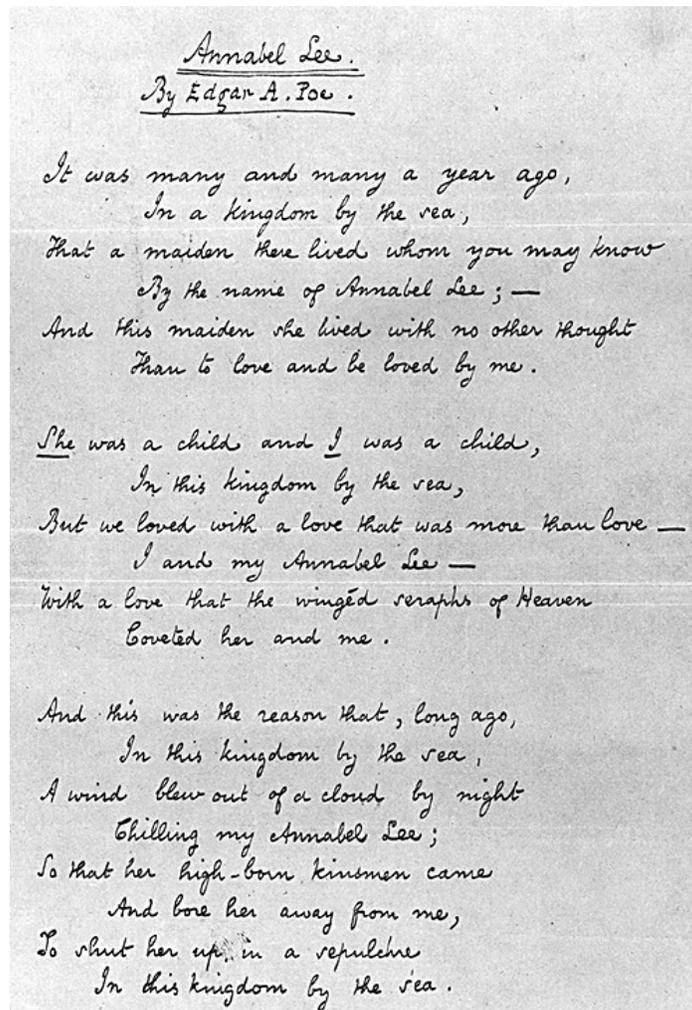
And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!



Nyx, Goddess of the Night by William Bouguereau

I'm not sure how much I like this poem compared to some other poems about beautiful women. Some might say that everything is rather too obviously expressed here. One might argue, for example, that

a poem like Annabel Lee, which reads at first like a child's song, still has twists and turns of words and meaning that make it more interesting. Besides, in Annabel Lee, having the specter of death brooding over the entire poem keeps the reader and writer from getting too comfortable.



First page of Annabel Lee, handwritten by Poe

But there is still memorable music in Byron's poem, and the degree of subtlety in the expression often has to do with how much you're willing to put into the reading. When I said the poem might appear obvious, for example, I think I was influenced by an unfair reputation that Byron has acquired over

the years. I should point out that there are many ways in which he was a pretty interesting guy. We especially should like him for being so passionate about Greece. He believed in being passionate about everything actually, and thought he should live his life in a very heroic way. In that way he was something of a Don Quixote, and probably would not have disliked the comparison. Someday, you might enjoy his long adventure poem 'The Corsairs'. (The Corsairs were a famous group of pirates that were very active on the North African coast, I think in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.) As for the poem itself, let me give it a more sympathetic reading for a little bit.

'She walks in beauty, like the night...' is a very nice line, for example. You can read it in many ways, but one reading I like is where he's implying that the night actually walks in beauty. What can this mean? Well, a starry night is obviously very beautiful and it's nice to walk in it. But it might be interesting to say that the night itself is walking. On the one hand, that's a fairly standard play of words that poets use. I remember a poem by a seventeenth century Spanish poet that goes on about a mirror being in love when it is he whose image is reflected in the mirror (likely the poet himself) that is the one in love. When you are walking in the beautiful starry night therefore, it is tempting to say that the night walks in beauty. (And then, the lady in the poem, he says, does the same. By the way, she was apparently wearing a black funerary dress that prompted the comparison. Hmm, are you getting the impression that any poem about a beautiful woman tends to hover near death, if only secretly? This might actually express a somewhat universal sentiment that if something is very beautiful then it cannot possibly last very long. Think of a fresh flower. A lugubrious sort of person might say, with some justice, that it is

exactly this awareness that the flower is ephemeral that gives our sense of its beauty such a sharp sting.) On the other hand, when you are actually walking on a star-lit night, it is not at all hard to imagine that the whole night is walking. Think about how in the night all the different objects, the trees, the houses, the sky above the rooftops, meld together into something like a continuous, indistinct and glowing tapestry, instead of standing out individually as in the day. Then as you walk along quietly, you might enjoy the sensation that the whole world is somehow magically moving forward (or maybe in no definite direction) together. So you see, a simple line of poetry can express quite clearly certain natural experiences (the kind that are sometimes called 'metaphysical') that we are barely conscious of on an everyday basis and tie it up to something quite different and concrete, such as a pretty woman wearing a black dress. Incidentally, that word 'climes' in the second line is short for 'climates' so the whole line could well be referring to Arizona, although I'm sure it's not. My guess is that he's thinking about southern Italy or Greece again. But as far as beautiful, cloudless starry nights go, I wouldn't be surprised if we in Arizona understand them a good deal better than most of the English romantics. In any case, this is how a poem is. You don't have to read it that way to get enjoyment out of it, but a lot of the time, every line is very carefully written, and can give you many pleasant things to think about if you will let it.

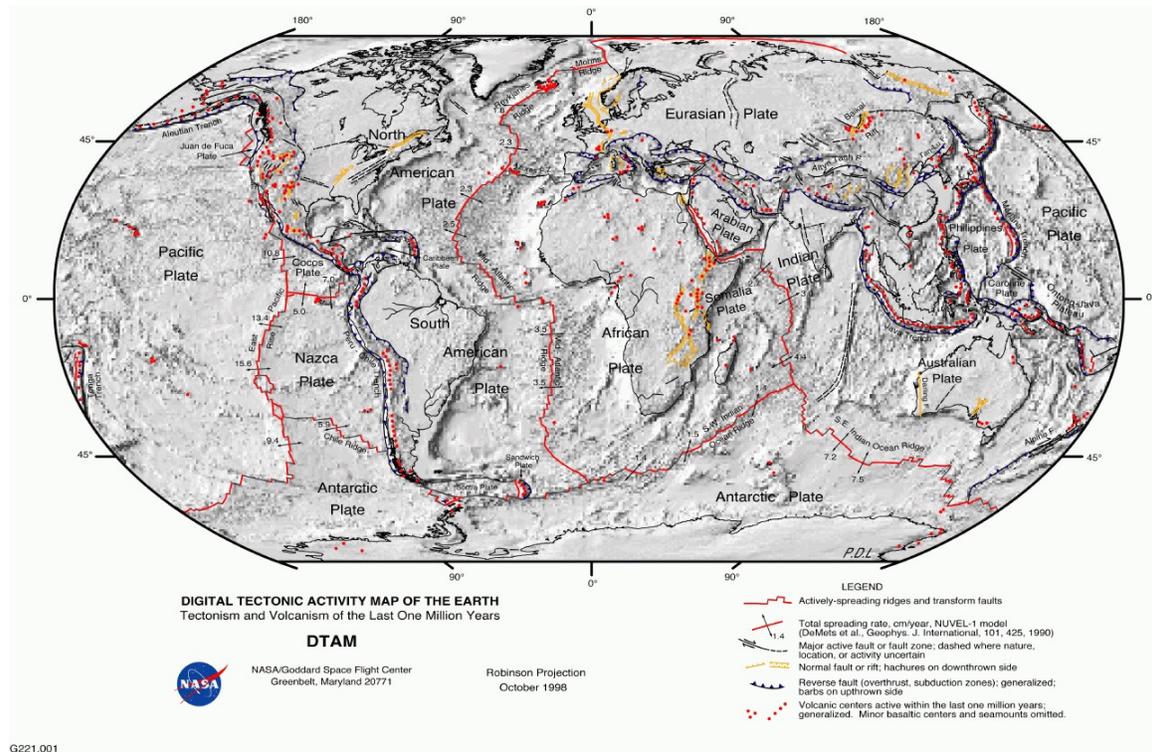


Starry night over the Rhone by van Gogh

Unfortunately, Dr. Faustus was also a bit disappointing. One problem was that they had compressed the whole play into just one hour. It's a bit hard to get too much drama into an hour. And then, the people were made up in a garish fashion, with too much white powder on their faces. I think I rather prefer dignified clothes in most plays, but that's a small matter. So I won't dwell much on that performance. It was probably just as well that it was so short. By then it was already midnight so I did want to get back to my flat. And then, the students (from a place called King's College) who did the acting were working very hard, so I'm sure they needed their rest.

I had an enjoyable conversation over lunch today, anyways. It was with Mr. Gabrielov who is also visiting the institute. It turns out that he teaches, of all places, at Purdue University where I will also be working starting in the Fall. His research is especially interesting because he is simultaneously a mathematician and a geologist. As a geologist, he studies earthquakes. Now isn't that quite wonderful? He explained to me a bit about the kind of things they do to predict earthquakes, emphasizing mostly how hard it is to do. One has to know a lot about plate tectonics. This is the motion of the earth's crust, which is divided up into many pieces called 'plates' that move with respect to one another. Most violent earthquakes occur near the places where the different plates meet. But it's very difficult to predict when one will actually occur and many people would like to come up with a good mathematical theory of earthquakes. It's certainly not as simple as just avoiding these meeting points (called 'divides'). One hard question, for example, is whether the earth's mantle is more like a fluid or more like a solid in the way it moves. And then, how exactly the motion of the mantle influences seismic activity is considered a very difficult, almost inaccessible problem. Many more things for you to think about some day. As we were discussing the plates he told me something I didn't know at all, namely, that the other planets do not have such moving plates. They think the special nature of the earth's chemical composition is responsible for the plate structure, but no one knows for sure. Mr. Gabrielov is from Russia like Eugene's father (remember him?). In fact, those two had the same teacher, a Mr. Gelfand. But when he finished his studies in mathematics at the university, there was no teaching job available for him anywhere in Russia. So his teacher found him a rather strange job at an institute for geophysical research, which

he knew nothing about at the time! But he found the work they did so interesting that he took it up seriously himself. Now he does both, and is probably much happier for it. So you never know what kind of unexpected presents life will send your way.



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One other nice thing was that I got a phone call from Mr. Coates shortly after lunch. He was very excited. He said that some of my the ideas that I explained to him yesterday relates in a very nice way to quite deep mathematics that he and his students have been thinking about for a long time. We will meet again in three days to discuss the matter some more. This is how research in mathematics goes. You think about some things very hard, but then as you compare notes with other people who think about other things, they often enough come together in pleasant ways. And it's so much nicer when you can discuss things face to face.

Ugh. Tonight, once again, I am actually quite sleepy. The jet-lag must be wearing off now. As I write, I'm wondering if the first letter I wrote has reached you yet. Maybe by the day after tomorrow...

To be continued.

Mr. D.



Lord Byron by Richard Westall