

## Intricate Surgery in English Poetry

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*The objects of poet's thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and senses of men are, it's true, his favourite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings.... The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations they are contemplated by these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings.*

**-William Wordsworth**

Poetry, like other genres of literature, deals with the life of man and his environment, his pursuits and activities, his feelings and thoughts, his ambitions and aspirations touching almost all branches of knowledge into which man has categorized the information and wisdom accumulated over the years. What distinguishes poetry from the other forms is the special artistic skill deployed by it for synthesizing reality and imagination and the resultant distinctive rhythm and harmony and music. Although Science and Poetry appear to be poles apart, they exhibit a deep underlying bond or relationship. The root is the fact that advancements in the field of science and technology have affected the society, bringing about a change in the environment and adding a fresh dimension to man's attitude thought, and behaviour. Though the Scientific and Technological developments are universal, yet to some extent they are socio-cultural specific, as is Literature. Poetry is a beautiful manifestation of Literature.

Wordsworth's observation and vision as lined in his Preface to Lyrical Ballads and quoted in the beginning of this article, have a ring of prophecy and have become a reality now. The Men of Science have created material revolution in various fields and the common man has become familiar with the discoveries and inventions in the field of Science and Technology. Poets, obviously, being part of the society in which they live, have been finding these discoveries and inventions as proper objects of their artistic creations, the poems. Ranging from the simple objects of Nature such as a flower, a flea or a fountain, to the complex technical objects like an engine, an aircraft, or an electronic brain, the poet has a very wide choice of topics for his poems. Hence, the field of Medical Sciences finding a place in poems is ineluctable. Though the impact of Medical Sciences on Poetry is evident even from very early times, we can discern a significant



*mirror, mirror on our world...*



impact during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. To have a flavour of this impact of Medical Sciences and practices on English Poetry let us look at two poems, *A Correct Compassion* (1952) by James Kirkup and *Little Cake* (1987) by Peter Redgrove.

*“ Meters record the blood, measure heart-beats, control the breath.  
Hieratic gesture: scalpel bares a creamy rib; with pincer knives  
The bone quietly is clipped, and lifted out. Beneath,  
The pink, black-mottled lung like revolted creature heaves,  
Now in the firm hands that quiver with a careful strength,  
Your knife feels through the hearts transparent skin; at first,  
Inside the pericardium, slits down half its length,  
The heart, black-veined, swells like a fruit about to burst.”*

The lines quoted above from the poem *A Correct Compassion* by James Kirkup elucidate the adroitness with which he versifies the *Mitral Stenosis Valvulotomy* performed by his friend and surgeon Philip Allison in the General Infirmary at Leeds. The poet intersperses words from medicine so deftly that it becomes so difficult for us to comprehend, which is better- the surgeon's legerdemain that is discussed, or the poet's artistry that is manifested. He fuses the scientific and literary diction appositely to describe a few steps involved in the surgery. For example, the phrases *creamy rib*, *pink, black-mottled lung*, and *black-veined heart*, etc., give a realistic picture of the organs during the course of surgery. In addition, the similes *lung like a revolted creature heaves*, and *heart swells like a fruit about to burst* are simply fabulous and are unsurpassed.

It is a long-term practice amongst the surgeons to use the placenta in eye operations as it contains all the nutrients for acting as a strong significant base. Peter Redgrove, a major 20<sup>th</sup> Century poet, writer, and playwright, appears to be cognizant of this practice and hence portrays how the surgeon tucks the placenta away in his bag after the successful deliverance of the baby from its mother's womb. The contemplations, spontaneous feelings and thoughts of a surgeon while removing the placenta after the child is delivered are dexterously delineated in dazzling poetic diction.

*The doctor picks up the metal  
Of the afterbirth hammered out  
Like bronze in the womb and  
Admires its rainbow sheen and  
Sniffing it, tucks it away in  
His bag; the flexile metal,  
The turquoise, the mother's jade,  
The blue-green baggage of the baby.*



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Redgrove throws light on the quirk of fate that the placenta, once served as the carapace for the infant before its birth is no more needed after it's born. Placenta, the object of this poem, resembles a pancake and,

*It is the devoted spectre  
Of the betrayed sibling  
Mutilated by this birth,  
The baby's red luggage, the destroyed twin  
Who remains indoors a little longer  
Not drinking but bleeding;  
The servitor at the round feast,  
Called 'placenta' - little cake.*

Poets of our time differ greatly from the poets of earlier times not only because of the changing times they are facing, but also of their acting in unison with their society. Poetry no more remains the domain of poets alone but also of scientists, technologists, surgeons, and other intellectuals. There is an interflow of ideas among the field of poetry and other fields of knowledge. Now the poet has at his disposal a greater variety of subject matter to deal with in his poetic creations. In the words of Robert Conquest, "*To be of one's own time is not an important virtue, it's a necessary one.*" It's a welcome change that poets under the influence of science and technology have started titivating their creations with words from medical and other sciences making poetry, an important genre of literature, more contemporary.



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