

Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

The Dark Hills (1920)

Dark Hills at evening in the west,
Where sunset hovers like a sound
Of golden horns that sang to rest
Old bones of warriors under ground,
Far now from all the bannered ways
Where flash the legions of the sun,
You fade—as if the last of days
Were fading and all wars were done.

ANALYSIS

One sentence, one poem. Grammatically, the sentence curls easily and without distortion into a pattern in which all lines rhyme alternately and each line is measured against a metrical framework of four iambic feet. The grammatical kernel of the sentence—“Dark hills... You fade”—indicates the subject of the poem: a description of a sunset in the west. The first four lines consist of modifiers attached to *hills*, the last four lines of modifiers attached to *fade*. The whole poem describes the dark hills, outlined against the lingering sunset glow, gradually fading as the light disappears, and sky and hills blend into the darkness of night.

But just as a sunset has many tones, so does this poem. Its life lies in its metaphors, in the modifiers. In the first four lines we are told that the light of the sunset seems to hover or linger as do the prolonged tones of trumpets blown at a military burial. The simile catches up not only the lingering quality of both sunset light and trumpet tone, but also their richness: the light of the sunset is golden, the sonorous tones of the trumpet seem golden and are blown from golden trumpets. (The resonance and sonority of these tones is echoed with admirable precision by the four long *o*'s, the rolling *l*'s, the lingering *n*'s, the concealed half-rhyme, and the final consonant correspondences of the two phrases *golden horns* and *old bones*.) In the last four lines we are told that the dark hills are now fading far from the bright skies of the midday sun. But again a military figure is used: the bright noonday skies are “the bannered ways,” the sun's rays transversing them “the legions of the sun.” *Banners* and *legions*, *warriors* and *horns*, all suggest the colorful pomp of ancient warfare explicitly indicated by *old*; the effect would have been quite different had the poet used *flags* and *regiments*, *soldiers* and *bugles*: words suggesting a more modern warfare and drab uniforms, inappropriate to the rich colors of the sunset.

All this martial imagery prepares us for the final simile. The dark hills fade into black night as if daylight were ending forever and history were done. Some day-ends do give this impression of utter finality. And the poet adds, “as if...all wars were done.” Now we see the meaning of the poem complete. Literally, it describes a sunset behind dark hills, “Dark hills... You fade.” But through the quality of its imagery—the metaphor and similes contained in the modifiers—are added larger overtones of meaning. War, the poem suggests, is a condition of human life. We have had wars since the beginning of recorded history (a second reason is now apparent for the poet's using the imagery of *ancient* warfare). We shall continue to have wars until the fading of “the last of days”—till history is done. A sunset poem is appropriately a somber poem. The darkness of the hills serves not only as a visual image but as an emotional symbol.

Laurence Perrine
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