

The
Intimate
Art of
Writing
Poetry

OTTONE M. RICCIO

FOREWORD BY
STEPHEN MINOT

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Foreword

“Being a poet,” Ottone Riccio writes, “means one cares about language and finds joy working with it.” Here is the balance of concern that differentiates this volume from others: On the one hand is *care*, which means mastering craft, learning techniques, studying the anatomy of the genre; on the other is *joy*, which wells up from within, the emotion that makes all that effort worthwhile.

Writing poetry takes work. It is not like humming or doodling with a pencil. There are marvelously intricate things that have been done with language, and none of us can really understand them until we analyze the techniques employed and attempt to use them in our own voice.

Mr. Riccio reminds us that we cannot be fresh and inventive until we have familiarized ourselves with the best of what has been done in the past. As he puts it, “In art nothing dies.” That is, the contemporary poet may draw on techniques of rhythm, rhyme, stanza, or metaphor from the work of centuries before. What we think of as a “new” approach—free verse, for example—often has its roots in poetry that was written more than two thousand years ago. A good poet sees this heritage not as a burden but as a continually unfolding source.

While mastering the craft involves effort, it should also, he reminds us, be joyous work. It must never be too far removed from the spontaneous. Every accomplished poet draws on his or her unconscious, and this volume helps the reader to listen for those signals and allow them to influence not only images selected but the auditory effects of rhythm and rhyme and the nuances of tone. What we may think of as chance phrasing may reflect our deepest feelings. The joy of creation comes when we tap these sources and are then able to apply our knowledge of technique to the shaping of a line that is unmistakably “right.”

The extended metaphors with which this book is organized are unique. They deserve special attention because they are a key to the author's view of the creative process. First, the “engagement,” the commitment. Here at the very outset we are told that “writing poetry is a worthwhile experience for its own sake.” What a welter of misconceptions this sweeps aside! Yes, it is unfortunate that poets are not paid a living wage for their art; but those who are committed rely on other rewards. For them the act itself is a pleasure—first the writing and then the performing, the public reading. Publication is a concern, but it is not a poet's primary motive.

The author next presents the anatomy of the creative process: the conscious and unconscious sources are like “brain” and “heart” respectively; specific forms such as lyric and narrative poems are like “the physiognomy,” the outer appearance. Structural elements are presented to us as the “bone and muscle” without which expression would be subjective ramblings. Rhythm and meter are seen as “the middle ear”—that intricate source of balance. Then “the voice,” which includes diction and tone. Under “life signs” he includes all those figures of speech and symbolic suggestions that give a poem the sense of being alive.

After that anatomy comes “the consummation,” the actual process of composition, and “the nurturing,” which includes sound and practical advice on how to achieve self-discipline and how to conquer the dreaded writer's block. His final section is appropriately “the weaning,” the entire process of sending your work forth into the world.

The balance between hard work and the joy of creation that characterizes this volume is as important for the novice as it is for the accomplished poet. I once visited a college that serves as a "second chance" for students who have failed in one or more other institutions. Morale, of course, was a major problem. And nowhere was it more needed than in the lowest of courses, remedial English. Since all traditional methods had failed, the teachers turned the problem over to a group of more gifted seniors. Their solution: spend the first two weeks writing a villanelle! True, it took reading, analysis, and discussion; it took work. But what these students learned was that a complex literary form can be mastered with no more effort than it takes to learn an intricate disco step. Few of them returned to that particular verse form, but they drew from their effort a new confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and the personal proof of what a delight language can be.

This volume should serve as an ideal text for poetry classes. It is the kind of book most students will want to keep, to review long after graduation. It should also be of real value to those who are writing on their own. Although there is no substitute for working with a group, this book can serve as a buffer against isolation. The tone is warm, supportive, and enthusiastic.

There is no mistaking the fact that Ottone Riccio is a man who "cares about language and finds joy working with it." With his help, the reader will also.

Stephen Minot

Author,
*Three Genres: The Writing
of Poetry, Fiction, and Drama,
Second Edition*

Preface

This book is the one for which I searched, at the time of the beginning, and could not find. All you poets just beginning or writing in solitude, looking for the rituals of poetry, the word made music, the mystery of technique, the quickness of knowing, doing, living the poem; all you poets gathered in classes, workshops, discussion groups, seminars, wherever; all you poets recording the history of the universe; all you poets reaching out of the darkness of desire toward the spurt of creation; you poets and teachers of poets who come to review and renew—this is your book now.

This book of yours has swum back to beginnings; there lies renewal. Some forget, lose sight of poetry's essence, its multitudinous features. Some admire only the mystique of poetry, not the demanding craft. Some would rather be published than strive to write poems. Some are unwilling to place their hands on poetry's essence. This is not their book. But those of you who are unafraid, who dare touch the pulse of poetry, this book is yours now.

Poetry is insistent paradox. It articulates that which cannot be articulated.

Words refute their boundaries. Syllables fire energies,

omnidirectional; their dynamic waves swell, repel, merge, overcome, outride individual profiles, creating an overcom-
passing sea.

There is a poetry magic, magic rising from the poem. The poet is Merlin; poetry is illusion, sleight of mind. The magicians know their craft, and we believe.

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