Poetry

AN INTRODUCTION

Poems

WITH ESSAYS

LANE

william g. lane
university of colorado

POETRY
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POEMS WITH ESSAYS

with original explications by Donald Davie
Stanley Kunitz
John Fredrick Nims
Karl Shapiro
Richard Wilbur

d. c. heath
and
company

for RICHARD

Acknowledgments are to be found at the end of the book.

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POETRY
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一个介绍

preface

Aims. The aims of this book are twofold: first, to offer the student and the instructor an ample anthology of poems for their study and enjoyment; second, to offer the student aid in writing commentaries about poetry, chiefly by supplying him models.

Explication: "a full acount." Students generally find it difficult to know what an instructor has in mind when he askes them to write an explication of a poem. Webster defines the word as "a detailed description; a full account." But how to proceed in giving a full account, for one who has not before made the efforts, is often a matter of concern. To help with that problem is one of the chief aims of this book.

To encourage the student in individual, but not eccentric, interpretation, I have included explications of several poems. Some of these analyses are chosen deliberately because they are contradictory. In reading the same poem, two or more critics have reacted differently, and, after carefully examining and discussing poetic techniques, have declared the poetic statement to be different. Which is "right"? That of course is the problem. And that is what the student is encouraged to be sufficiently bold and independent to decide for himself. But only after he, too, has carefully examined the poem, line by line if necessary, tried alternative readings until he decides among them, considered the relevant techniques employed to achieve these statements, and then determined the poem's "meaning."

Original explications. Yet another feature of the book is meant to help and encourage the student in this pleasant task of responding and knowing. Several of the most respected poet-critics of our day have contributed original explications of poems of their own choosing. Thus, John Frederick Nims writes on Wyatt's "They Flee From Me," Richard Wilbur writes on Burns's "Red, Red Rose," Donald Davie writes on Hardy's "During Wind and Rain," Karl Shapiro on Wordsworth's sonnet "Nuns Fret Not," and Stanley Kunitz on Roethke's "Elegy for Jane."

Prosody. Karl Shapiro's lucid and compact ABC OF PROSODY affords the student an excellent groundwork in the forms and rhythms of poetry. The same flexibility I have insisted upon for the student-reader in meaning is recognized by Mr. Shapiro in regard to prosody. "There is no need to approach this technical side of poetry with fear," he says, if, among other points, we remember that "no one has ever set down a complete body of rules for the right analysis of verse. Indeed, poets them-

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selves often disagree about the scansion, or measuring of a line of verse . . . ."

Selection and arrangement of poems. The overall arrangement of poems, explications, and commentary is intended to aid the student and instructor in taking up the various aspects of poetry. Besides several groups of related poems and pairs of explications, larger sections are composed of many poems under headings which suggest a factor emphasized in each and common to all. All such arrangements tend dangerously toward over-simplication, but the advantages in this case outweigh the disadvantages, I think. Even strict chronological order has an obvious disadvantage of another kind, as does that of grouping by *genre* or type.

Bad poems share at least one element with good poems; they *try* to say something about human experience. They may fail for any number of reasons—sentimentality, weakness of thought and language, weakness of versification. To illustrate this point, their failure to satisfy, but more particularly to highlight the successfulness of a good poem, I have included some inferior poems. The student, finding several pairs of poems on the same theme or subject, has an opportunity to compare statements, to examine the techniques by which the statements are made, and in so doing to determine why some are better. Having done so, he has learned and applied some of the principles of literary criticism.

Another kind of grouping is that of two or more poems closely allied in one or more details—theme, dramatic situation, conflict—but strikingly different in tone, manner, or resolution. Again, the use of comparison and contrast including techniques, should enable the student better to evaluate the excellence of a poem and to prove the validity of his own judgments.

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W. G. L.

introduction

AN ABC OF EXPLICATION

James Russell Lowell, the nineteenth-century American poet, offered this rule of criticism:

> It is the best rule for happiness in life as well as for soundness in esthetics, to try and find out why a thing is good, rather than why it is bad.

If the thing in this instance is a poem and it is good, it will give the reader pleasure. And if his reaction is that of pleasure, he may well want to know why he has reacted as he has. For this purpose he will analyze the significant elements of the poem. Obviously, these elements will vary in importance from one poem to another, but it is usually a case of dominance and emphasis, seldom inclusion and exclusion. Sometimes the very absence of a common and therefore expected element, imagery for example, can contribute to the effect a poem makes. Note the grace and exactness with which Stanley Kunitz combines the elements of response to a poem, in this case Roethke's "Elegy for Jane," (p. 363) and the analysis of the elements that produce this response:

> I write about this poem not in order to probe its difficulties, which are minimal, but to ascertain, if I can, why it gives me so much pleasure. Obviously my pleasure is in the poetry and not in the event that precipitated it.

This is the *raison d'etre* of explication: the desire or need to know what we have experienced, what we have discovered, and how, using the complexities of prosody (versification) and language, the poet has conveyed and revealed to us what he has.

To the question "How Should One Read a Book?" Virginia Woolf supplies an answer which we could readily transfer from the reader of novels to the reader of poetry.

> Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read, but to write; to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words. Recall, then, some event that has left a distinct impression on you—how, at the corner of the street, perhaps, you passed two people talking. A tree shook; an electric light danced; the tone of the talk was comic, but also tragic; a whole vision, an entire conception, seemed contained in that moment.
>
> But when you attempt to reconstruct it in words, you will find that

> it breaks into a thousand conflicting impressions. Some must be subdued; others emphasised; in the process you will lose, probably, all grasp upon the emotion itself. Then turn from your blurred and littered pages to the opening pages of some great novelist—Defoe, Jane Austen, Hardy. Now you will be better able to appreciate their mastery.

That is well said; within this comment are most of the elements of explication that will concern us. The emphasis is first upon language, "the dangers and difficulties of words." Next there is the dramatic situation, the representation of particular characters in a particular place and time. Conversation is included in this, but the tone of it, the attitudes it expresses, are all-important. Though only a moment is to be recorded, "an entire conception," "a whole vision," seems contained in it.

Poetry shares these features and this idiom with the other large *genres* or kinds of literature: epic, prose fiction, and drama. At times two of these forms merge, as when drama or epic is written in poetry. (Shakespeare combined poetry and prose in many of his plays). But the shorter forms of poetry such as the sonnet, the lyric, the ballad, and the ode afford us the best application of Mrs. Woolf's ideas. These shorter forms permit a quicker test, but they illustrate also the power of a few words. This ability to fuse fresh and concentrated strength into words in context is one sign of a poet's excellence. A simple test of his skill is readily available: try to substitute a better word. The degree of your difficulty is the measure of his adeptness.

Matter and manner, statement and versification, are parts only of *poetic statement*. That is the total statement a poem makes. It is unique. We have agreed no analysis, no full account, can reproduce the poem. Archibald MacLeish has caught the whole idea in a striking phrase, much quoted and sometimes rebutted:

> A poem should not mean
> But be,

Whether that be demonstrably true or not, many poems make imperious demands upon us. They are capable of forcing us to a certain frame of mind, to a sense of rediscovery of the familiar or the *un*familiar world they recreate. We learn something anew each time we read them; we are forced to make connections (Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens), to see resemblances (Marianne Moore) or to see anew (Blake). No explication can hope to reproduce the manner in which these revelations are made. But a carefully organized and coherent explication, the best essay about a poem the student is capable of writing, should embody the poem.

A good explication fits its emphasis and analysis to the main elements of a particular poem. The new and reprinted explications in this book offer students a chance to see that principle in action. In the pages below, two explications on Cummings' "Portrait" show a range of differing opinions which are nevertheless sharply focused and defined by the crucial issue of the poem, the poet's tone and attitude toward his subject, Buffalo Bill. In Section VII, Donald Davie's explication emphasizes the biographical elements that underlie Hardy's"During Wind and Rain." John Nims, in Section VII, writes on a poem of the early Renaissance

(Wyatt's "They Flee from Me"), and he necessarily concentrates on how the poem uses the language and idiom of that period. Richard Wilbur chooses a delicate task in Burns' "A Red, Red Rose," analyzing and defending the special appeal of a song lyric despite its conventional language and dramatization. Kark Shapiro's essay in Section II (p. 65) makes a very personal statement against Wordsworth's apologies for traditional social and poetic forms (in particular, the sonnet), which Spairo as twentieth century critic and poet finds deadening to free creativity. Shapiro's essay demonstrates an important aspect of the professional critic's role—that of constant reinterpretation of "classics" in light of present-day poetic craftsmanship and of our modern cultural climate. Thus Shapiro, as professional poet and modern critic, takes Wordsworth's poem beyond its own world and refers it to the standards that concern today's writers, in troubled twentieth-century America. In doing so, he gives a passionate reaction to some selected implications of Wordsworth's poem that give him immediate concern as modern poet. His own poetry, in this book's selection from *Essay on Rime,* shows some similar concerns and insights to the problems of poetic idiom, and a similar impatience with what to him is faulty or loosely used idiom in the work of other poets.

Students who are writing explications may well be interested in the relevance of poetry to their present concerns, but their first task in responding critically to any poem is to consider what it is, as a totality, in its own terms, and to select for explication those aspects which best represent and embody the whole poem.

THE POET AND THE CRAFT

The best answers to the question, What is Poetry? are themselves poems or parts of poems. There have been many attempts at definition both in prose and in poetry but none is satisfactory for long to many people. At best one can only suggest samples: Coleridge, "the best words in the best order"; Wordsworth, "spontaneous overflow of emotion recollected in tranquility"; Poe, "the rhythmical creation of beauty"; Arnold, "a criticism of life." Rossetti calls a sonnet a "Moment's Monument" (p. 56) and Carl Sandburg, too, emphasizes the importance of "Precious Moments." (p. 60). On the other hand, remembering the dangers and difficulties of words, we are forced by T. S. Eliot's striking phrase in "East Coker," V, to consider poems as "raids on the inarticulate," with the shoddy equipment, language, deteriorating even as it is used. Dylan Thomas calls his making of poetry a "Sullen Art" (p. 66). Richard Wilbur's "Complaint" (p. 33) is a comment both on himself and his craft.

Closely related to the problem of defining poetry is the difficulty of defining the poet himself. There is often much said about "the poet" as distinct from "the man." Perhaps at times they may be safely separated. In many instances, at least, we do well to remember that a man is talking, sometimes in inflated language, about poets in general. Thus, Shelley's famous conclusion to his "Defense of Poetry": "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind." More persuasive and satisfying are those instances in which a man is speaking of *himself* as a poet and about his own responses and attitudes.

Byron suffers from afflatus and the nineteenth century view of the role of the poet in *Childe Harold*, Canto III, st. XCVII:

> If I could embody and unbosom now
> That which is most within me,—could I wreak
> My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
> Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
> All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
> Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into *one* word,
> And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
> But as it is, I live and die unheard,
> With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.

And we may recall Byron's own definition of poetry as "the lava of the imagination to prevent an eruption." Herbert (p. 5), of an earlier age, is more convincing when he reveals his devotion to "enchanting language" and "lovely metaphors." Or again, no one has ever doubted Keats's statement to a friend: "I look upon fine phrases like a lover." Despite the centuries that intervene between Herbert and Keats their attitudes are the same. Both are acutely aware that

> Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung,
> Deaf the praised ear, and mute the tuneful tongue.
>
> Pope, "To An Unfortunate Lady"

Death may be the inevitable end, but while they live, their love of language manifests itself in all they write. It is the medium of their art. As Eliot has said, "Every poem [is] an epitaph."

Tennyson pulled together all these separate strands—poetry, fame, death, epitaph—in writing of the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam.

(Alfred Tennyson: from *In Memoriam*, LXXVII)

> What hope is here for modern rhyme
> To him, who turns a musing eye
> On songs, and deeds, and lives, that lie
> Foreshortened in the tract of time?
>
> These mortal lullabies of pain
> May bind a book, may line a box,
> May serve to curl a maiden's locks,
> Or when a thousand moons shall wane
>
> A man upon a stall may find,
> And, passing, turn the page that tells
> A grief, then changed to something else,
> Sung by a long-forgotten mind.
>
> But what of that? My darkened ways
> Shall ring with music all the same;
> To breathe my loss is more than fame,
> To utter love more sweet than praise.

With quietness and honesty Tennyson questions the kind of poetry he is writing on this occasion and the purpose it may serve, for him at least. The issue is a large one: what can be said by a poet of his day that explains or lessens the pain of untimely death? There is no attempt to generalize for all poets. He answers for himself, in language that is affecting

and with honesty of mind that permits him to anticipate the ironies inherent in his situation. However intense his own feeling now, at a later time a casual shopper, looking for something to read, may idly turn over his pages that record the poet's grief. No matter. These are "mortal lullabies"; they translate grief into music; utterance, articulation is all.

TONE

We have agreed that Tennyson is speaking of and for himself. The tone of voice is his; it is the same for poet and narrator. *Tone,* the quality of voice in which the narrator speaks, results from attitude. Attitude is the way the narrator (who may or may not be the poet himself) feels about his subject and his theme. The certainty, or lack of it, with which a narrator attacks his problem may well establish the tone of the poem. The poetic voice, by which we shall mean the voice of the narrator, may be described by any of the words used to describe an actual voice. Calm, confident, shrill, defiant, sarcastic, ironic, humble, proud—a list would be almost unending. Tone includes the *pitch* (level) and *timbre* (coloration) of the voice.

Within a single poem variations in tone may occur. Just as in actual life, a statement may begin in assurance and end as a tentative proposition; a declaration may resolve itself in a question. Consider the tone of voice of the narrator of Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" (p. 197). Unlike Tennyson's poet-narrator, in the section of *In Memoriam* referred to above, Browning's narrator, as the title indicates, is the Bishop. (In this sense, the poet is non-existent or of no concern to us at the moment.) Note, then, the change in tone of the Bishop's voice as he turns from the subject of his mistress and his rival Old Gandolf to the kind of marble he wants for his tomb, or note the tone of fear and arrogance which combine in his voice when he both wheedles and threatens his listeners. Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (p. 316) is another poem which reveals marked variations in the tone, urgency, and coloration of the poetic voice speaking the poem. Abrupt shifts in tonal qualities or juxtapositions of conflicting tones are sometimes dramatically effective. Yeats's Crazy Jane poems contain this element of striking contrast in tone as the mad girl carries out her dialogue with the Bishop.

Tone may also determine meaning. To say one thing and mean the opposite is to speak ironically. *Irony,* in this instance, is a figure of speech to describe a literal meaning opposite to that intended. Any number of easy examples can be supplied from ordinary conversation about the weather, sports, theatre, and so on. In conversation, of course, it is the tone of voice of the speaker that will make clear the intention behind the actual statement, though there may also be obvious external aids to meaning. For example, one student may say to another, with whom he had planned to play tennis, "Boy, this is a great day for tennis!" (it is raining). Or there is the famous remark from *The Virginian:* "Smile when you say that." But in poetry the irony is seldom so obvious. Moreover, there are few if any external aids in verse to show a situation directly opposite to the face value of the statement. The reader must be alert to the dramatic situation in the poem itself, to the position of the poetic

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speaker in relation to the content of his statement. A good analysis of how the context of the poem can reveal ironic or indirectly stated meanings is demonstrated in the explication by John Nims for Wyatt's poem "They Flee from Me." Here Nims not only explores the problems of outdated meanings and connotations (discussed more fully below), but shows aptly the richness of meanings available "for whatever ears might pick it up" in a sufficiently perceptive and responsive reader.

The importance of tone to meaning is amply demonstrated in Cummings' "Portrait." Besides the poem, you are offered a documentary account of the situation out of which the poems evolves. Two explications follow, both logical and both using the same evidence. But the interpretations differ in their definitions of tone. With that difference underscored, the "meaning" or poetic statement changes from one explication to the other. In resolving the question of tone, the student will choose between the possible statements the poem makes.

(E. E. Cummings: "Portrait.")

Buffalo Bill's
defunct
who used to
ride a watersmooth-silver
stallion
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
Jesus
he was a handsome man
and what i want to know is
how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death

(Norman Foerster: a note on Buffalo Bill, from *American Poetry and Prose.*)

> A chief grievance of the Indians was the white man's wanton destruction of the buffaloes which had provided the tribes with food, clothing, and their principal source of money. There had been millions of buffaloes; it is said that a herd crossing the trans-continental railroad stalled a Union Pacific train for three days! In a few years they were gone, their place taken by grazing cattle. The cattle kingdom covered an area more than one-fourth of the United States. Annually vast herds were driven north from Texas to fatten on the grassy plains of Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. The great days of the cowboy, most colorful of all our frontier types, lasted about twenty years, while the "long drive" was possible in the wide open country. Then the ranges were fenced, and the "Wild West" was gone.
>
> To the East and the world, the Wild West was typified by "Buffalo Bill." William Frederick Cody, son of an Iowa farmer, got his nickname by killing buffalo for meat, for which he was employed by the Kansas Pacific. As a current rhyme had it:
>
> Buffalo Bill, Buffalo Bill,
> Never missed and never will;
> Always aims and shoots to kill,
> And the company pays his buffalo bill.

Described as "the finest figure of a man that ever sat a steed," he wore long hair to his shoulders, a mustache, and a trim goatee. He tried his hand at dime novels, such as *The Dead-Shot Four;* he "shot" Indians in a Chicago theater; and at length he worked up his Wild West Show, in which he astonished audiences with his skill in shooting, on the gallop, tossed-up glass balls. Even with rifle bullets (rather than shot) in the first years of the show, he could shatter 87 balls out of 100. He included in his show Annie Oakley, Sitting Bull, and even a preposterous feature called "Football on Horseback, between Indians and Cowboys." The show reached New York, and in England was given before Queen Victoria. Assuredly an important aspect of the life of this period was the appeal of the West to the popular imagination.

(Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: a commentary on "Portrait," from *Understanding Poetry.*)

This poem deals with what is a rather common theme, and treats that theme simply. Death claims all men, even the strongest and most glamorous. How does the poet in treating such a common theme manage to give a fresh and strong impression of it? He might have achieved this effect of course in a number of different ways, and as a matter of fact, the general device which he employs is not simply one device: it is complex. In this case, however, the most prominent element is the unconventional attitude which he takes toward a conventional subject, and in this particular poem, the matter of tone is isolated sufficiently for us to examine it rather easily (though we must not forget either that there are other matters to be examined in this poem or that tone is a factor in every poem).

In the first place, what is the difference between writing

Buffalo Bill's
defunct

and

Buffalo Bill's
dead?

The first carries something of a tone of conscious irreverence. The poet here does not approach the idea of death with the usual and expected respect for the dead. He is matter-of-fact, unawed, and even somewhat flippant and joking. But the things which he picks out to comment on in Buffalo Bill make a strong contrast with the idea of death. The picture called up is one of tremendous vitality and speed: for example, the stallion is mentioned and is described as "watersmooth-silver." The adjective contains not only a visual description of the horse which Buffalo Bill rode but a kinetic description is implied too. How was the horse "watersmooth"? Smooth, graceful in action. (The poet by running the words together in the next line is perhaps telling us how to read the line, running the words together to give the effect of speed. The way the poem is printed on the page is designed probably to serve the same purpose, the line divisions being intended as a kind of arrangement for punctuation and emphasis. But the odd typography is not of fundamental importance.) The "portrait" of Buffalo Bill given here after the statement that he is "defunct" is a glimpse of him in action breaking five clay-pigeons in rapid succession as he flashes by on his stallion—the sort of

glimpse which one might remember from the performance of the Wild West show in which Buffalo Bill used to star. The exclamation which follows is exactly the sort of burst of boyish approval which might be struck from a boy seeing him in action or remembering him as he saw him. And the quality of "handsome" applies, one feels, not merely to his face but to his whole figure in action.

The next lines carry on the tone of unabashed, unawed, slangy irreverence toward death. Death becomes "Mister Death." The implied figure of the spectator at a performance of the Wild West show helps justify the language and manner of expression used here, making us feel that it is in character. But the question as asked here strikes us on another level. It is a question which no boy would ask; it is indeed one of the old unanswerable questions. But here it is transformed by the tone into something fresh and startling. Moreover, the dashing, glamorous character of the old Indian fighter gets a sharp emphasis. The question may be paraphrased like this: Death, you don't get lads like him every day, do you? The way the question is put implies several things. First, it implies the pathos at the fact that even a man who had such enormous vitality and unfailing youthfulness, had to die. But this pathos is not insisted upon; rather, it is presented indirectly and ironically because of the bantering and flippant attitude given in the question, especially in the phrases "Mister Death" and "blueeyed boy." And in the question, which sums up the whole poem, we also are given the impression that death is not terrible for Buffalo Bill—it is "Mister Death" who stands in some sort of fatherly and prideful relation to the "blueeyed boy."

In attempting to state what the tone is here we have, in trying to state it specifically, perhaps distorted it somewhat. Moreover, we have certainly not given an exhaustive account of the tone of this poem. But what has been said above is perhaps nearly enough complete to let us see how important an element the tone of the poem is. In this case—a case as we have already noted in which it is easy to deal with the tone in some isolation—it is the *tone* which transforms what might be easily a hackneyed and dead poem into something fresh and startling.

(Louis J. Budd: explication on "Portrait" by E. E. Cummings.[1])

E. E. Cummings' terse portrait of Buffalo Bill, easily among his best-known efforts, is usually cited as one of his most successful poems. Yet a detailed reading has been made only by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their *Understanding Poetry*. They view the poem as an unconventional approach to the old, old theme that "death claims all men, even the strongest and most glamorous"; they sense in it a "pathos at the fact that even a man who had such enormous vitality and unfailing youthfulness had to die" and an intimation that death "stands in some sort of fatherly and prideful relation to the 'blueeyed boy.'" In my opinion, their commentary misreads Cummings, as well as burdening him with an uncharacteristic naïveté concerning Buffalo Bill's hokum-laden career. I would suggest rather that Cummings regards the hero as a distressingly revered caricature of genuinely human actions and values, an avatar of stillborn sentience.

The poem's attitude is epitomized in the word "defunct." Buffalo Bill has not undergone a tragic crisis, he has not passed through a spiritual ordeal; he simply has ceased operating, liquidated like a bank or a poorly-placed filling station. The reader primarily realizes that Wil-

[1] *The Explicator,* XI (June, 1953), No. 8, item 55.

liam F. Cody will no longer prance through metropolitan hippodromes as the chief asset of a gaudy commercial venture. More broadly, the reader should recognize that the westering dream and nostalgic enjoyment of that dream are ended, the dream ripped by realities or stultified by vulgar misuse and the nostalgia deflated by post-Versailles cynicism. Buffalo Bill and his cohorts, galloping through this world in a blinding shroud of physical exertions divorced from meaningful reality, never were alive to tulips or the small white hands of the rain and can be scarcely said to have died.

Cuttingly, Cummings points up the shallowness and empty theatricality of Buffalo Bill's activities: he rode horses and shot clay pigeons. Moreover, the stallion's exquisite beauty and super-smooth running existed of course only on billboards or, at a deceptive distance, under floodlights. (Incidentally, poems 91 and 187 in Cummings' *Collected Poems* use white horses to symbolize docile human animality.) Astride this spurious horse the showman banged away not at his carelessly exterminated, herd-minded bison namesake and not even at pigeons but at clay discs, a sterile feat hastily disposed of in the poem's most casual line. Then, with leaden irony, Cummings ejaculates a summary parodying the scout's admirers who called him "handsome" because of such inhuman tricks and who seized in his strenuous posturings a Messianic substitute for perceptive experience.

In the last three lines, the speaker or "i" (who expresses Cummings' view) emerges and demotes Bill from a "man" to a "blueeyed boy" who never outgrew his Ned Buntline trappings. The calloused inquiry flung at death quite definitely hints that Cody deserves only oblivion. But the saucy jocularity also tells us that "Mister Death" is an unimpressive subaltern, a cosmic corporal gathering up defunct tin-gods and stuffed effigies (like the "Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls" or like other "ladies carefully dead"). Finally, these climactic lines unveil a sweeping scepticism; Mister Death is confronted with acid distrust as well as irreverence and the closing query is not purely rhetorical. In so far as the cosmic caretaker is more than an unimaginative functionary and is inclined to sort out the debris, he might, like many Americans, rate Buffalo Bill "handsome" after all and more important than, for instance, a young poet—or at least so feared some disillusioned spirits in the early 1920's.

LANGUAGE

James Russell Lowell made the following observations in an Inaugural Address in England upon assuming the Presidency of the Birmingham and Midland Institute in 1884. It is an even more opposite comment on our day of newspapers, radio, and television:

> And in a world of daily—nay, almost hourly—journalism, where every clever man, every man who thinks himself clever, or whom anybody else thinks clever, is called upon to deliver his judgment point-blank and at the word of command on every conceivable subject of human thought, or, on what sometimes seems to him very much the same thing, on every inconceivable display of human want of thought, there is such a spendthrift waste of all those commonplaces which furnish the permitted staple of public discourse that there is little chance of beguiling a new tune out of the one-stringed instrument on which we have been thrumming so long. In this desperate necessity one is often

> tempted to think that, if all the words of the dictionary were tumbled down in a heap and then all those fortuitous juxtapositions and combinations that made tolerable sense were picked out and pieced together, we might find among them some poignant suggestions towards novelty of thought or expression. But, alas! it is only the great poets who seem to have this unsolicited profusion of unexpected and incalculable phrase, this infinite variety of topic. For everybody else everything has been said before, and said over again after.

Of course Lowell's idiom here is that of his day. We might be tempted now to change the figure from dumping the words of the dictionary in a heap to that of feeding all the words of the dictionary into a computer. But change the idiom as we will, the basic idea remains the same and is valid.

As form and versification are significant elements of all poems, even the shortest, (see below, Shapiro's "ABC of Prosody"), so is language. Someone has said that poetry is ordinary language raised to the Nth power. (Note the idiom in which the idea is expressed.) The statement serves to emphasize the importance of words as words, the basic medium of poetry, as well as their force and intensity within the context of the poem. Part of their force lies in their two kinds of meaning: *denotation* and *connotation*. Denotation is the dictionary or literal meaning; connotation is the suggested or implied meaning. The denotation of a word can usually be documented or demonstrated; connotation is largely conjectural, for its variables are not only intensity of response but perception itself. Consider these groups of words:

man–woman–child (boy/girl)
father–mother–son/daughter
daddy–mommy–junior/sis
bachelor–spinster–orphan
husband–wife–child

They all have somehow to do with domestic and familial relationships. The family is a basic unit of society, and normally the basic relationships within a family are clearly defined. But when these relationships are denied, destroyed or become abnormal, new conflicts and tensions arise. Our literature is rich with examples in all major genres: drama, *Othello*, *King Lear;* novels, *The Way of All Flesh*, *Fathers and Sons;* and of course poetry.

One of the oldest forms of poetry in English is the folk ballad. Anonymous, deceptively simple in form, but with characteristic power and poignance, many folk ballads explore and record the conflicts in family relationships. There is no better example than "Edward" (p. 73) Note how in this ballad, (characteristic in its form, that is, the series of questions and answers, in this instance between a mother and son,) we are required to consider relationships between the members of a family. Some of them, indeed, are pointed up for us with great effectiveness ("And what wul ye leive to your ain mither deir?"; "My deir son. . ."), and that is done jus before the sudden and terrible reversal occurs ("The curse of hell. . .) The ballad is sometimes said to be an unsophisticated form of poetry. In one sense, this may be true, in the sense perhaps of comparison to greater

forms. The passage from "Edward" refers to the same kind of relationship and depends for its power upon the same elements as those in *Lear* when the old king utters his terrible curse upon his "unkind,"—meaning also "unnatural"—daughters.

Such passages illustrate also how poetry serves as a means of giving back to a word dulled in ordinary use something of its original power, or what may be called new power. Words as commonly used as those referred to (father-mother-son-daughter) lose much of their force in casual conversation. But the context of poetry recharges them.

The phenomenon is not limited to words of a particular category. Consider the words *proud* and *receiving* in the following lines, spoken by the Chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry V* as he appeals for the use of the spectator's imagination in creating the battlefield of Agincourt on the stage of the Globe Theatre (the "wooden O"):

> Think when we talk of horses that you see them
> Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth.

Transference of the epithet *proud* from the knights themselves, and from the high-spirited horses upon which they were mounted, to the word *hoofs,* and the sharpness of the visual focus with which we see the earth (a yielding medium) indented with the hoof prints (note the first word of that line)—this is the process by which the context of poetry can give words a new connotative power. Context not only establishes meaning, it intensifies and focuses.

As evidenced by the term "unkind" in Lear's speech cited above, there are occasions, especially in older poetry, when words are given meanings that the casual reader may be unaware of. In Shakespeare's day "unkind" meant not only what we now mean by it, but also "physically unnatural," and "lacking in natural gratitude." For Shakespeare's time, this was the irreplaceable word that expressed every aspect of Lear's relationship to his daughters. There is no easy way for the modern reader to learn some of these alternate or even changed meanings, except by reference to a noted dictionary that gives a complete historical account of meanings for each English word; this is the *Oxford English Dictionary* (formerly known as *New English Dictionary*) in its complete 13-volume edition, or in a more accessible one-volume *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. A careful explication of any older poem must take account of shifted meanings as described in this dictionary.

In poetry of any period, the intense focus of poetic context can put words in a position of giving a fuller range of denotative, or dictionary meanings than they do in casual conversation. A good unabridged dictionary, and even a modern desk dictionary, can show some surprising shades or distinctions of meaning that operate in a word in poetic context, and may help hint at some of the connotative meanings that an intensely focused word has developed in the poem.

Connotation makes possible many effects in poetry which language can achieve through "novelty of thought or expression" or the "unexpected and incalculable phrase" (the terms are Robert Lowell's). *Oxymoron* is a notable use of language in this manner. Two words of contradictory meanings, when paired, create an unresolved tension. Thus, when Keats

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